Learn all about meditation from
the Himalayan mystic

OM SWAMI

a million THOUGHTS

VISIT…

A Million Thoughts

Learn All About Meditation from a Himalayan Mystic After His 15,000 Hours of Intense Practice

OM SWAMI

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tapasvibhyo 'dhiko yogi jñānibhyo 'pi mato 'dhikaḥ,
karmibhyaścādhiko yogi tasmādyogībhavārjuna.[1]

A yogi is greater than the ascetic, greater than the empiricist and greater than the one engaged in selfish karma. Therefore, O Arjuna, be a yogi.

My humble obeisance to Mother Divine and the lineage of siddhas *for allowing this transmission*

This work is dedicated to you. It really is.
May you live each moment of your blessed life with
compassion, bliss and truth.

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Home Sweet Home

Have you ever unlocked the main door and entered your home after a vacation of two or four weeks? You are greeted by the smell of a closed home, a sweet smell of dust. You throw yourself on the couch and you let out a big sigh. You say, “Home, sweet home.”

No matter how beautiful the vacation might be, after a while you start missing home. You want to get back to a familiar setting. Your home may not be the plushest, it may not have the luxury of room service and housekeeping, and yet you feel most comfortable in your own home. There’s a natural ease, a sense of belonging, a different sort of freedom. It beats the luxuries of the five-star hotels.

The same goes for our soul as well. Our body is not its permanent home. Our individual consciousness is eternally trying to merge in the supreme consciousness. It wants to go home. It may not be an eloquent orator to tell you so clearly but that’s what it wants to do. Because we are beings of immense freedom and infinite potential, and here we are caught up in the petty tendencies and desires of our mind and body.

The soul wants to go back to its source. This is the most fundamental law of nature, of creation and destruction: everything must return to its source. Our body may be temporary, our minds conditioned, our consciousness a wary traveller, but our soul knows where it belongs.

That’s why every person at some point of time in their lives is forced to think about the meaning of their lives. Everyone, who’s experienced even a minute of fulfillment, embarks on a journey greater than their individual existence. That journey could be the path of Einstein or the passion of Christ; it could be the path of Buddha or the moksha of Vedas.

We may have forgotten our true nature, but our soul – eternal and unblemished – wants to go home. Until you show it the way, the restlessness in life will not go away. No pleasure or relationship can offer you permanent fulfillment because we are all on a vacation, and we are missing home.

Meditation is going home. It is going back to your source, where you belong, so that you are no longer what people tell you who you are, or what the world

has made you to believe, or even what you think of yourself. Instead, it is to discover yourself, to get to your primal source from where bliss, happiness and joy flow constantly. It is to discover your original home, without the furniture of jealousy, covetousness, envy, hatred. A home with no walls of ego and anger. A place where your soul rests in peace, where consciousness flows unimpeded like the gentle Ganges murmuring on a sunny day.

Let me take you home. It's a long walk, the path is arduous but it's worth every step. You'll discover that happiness is not a pursuit, it's a feeling. On your way home, you'll find that freedom is not a quest, it's a state. You'll understand that even the best resort can't be your home. For, as Shiva, the foremost yogi said, "Things are not what they seem, O Goddess, for this world is like a dream."[1]

When you get home, you'll realize that your room of bliss has always been there. It's *your* home, after all.

Introduction

Like a moth rushes into the fire without caring about the outcome, each one of us is attracted towards light. This attraction is innate. It propels us to constantly act towards a greater sense of fulfillment. Regardless of how you want it and whether you like it or not, the truth is you can't run away from the two most fundamental elements of human life. The pursuit of happiness and the quest for freedom. From a sinner to a saint, a beggar to a billionaire – each one of us is working towards acquisition of happiness and freedom. And why not, for to be happy and free is immensely empowering.

Everything we do and most things we think are ultimately geared towards feeling happier and freer. Every act of ours is aimed at avoidance of suffering. And yet, the harder we work towards our fulfillment, the more shackled we feel. The Vedic view and my personal observation is that our suffering results from a lack of harmony in our being. When what we want from life or others is not aligned with our actions, speech and thoughts – we feel exceedingly restless and dissatisfied. To this effect, I'm reminded of a beautiful tantric legend I heard from an adept during one of my travels. It was a good story that has remained with me and I am paraphrasing it here in my own words.

Legend has it that there was a time when Shiva – the first meditator – roamed the earth with his consort, Devi. Just as a beautiful moon softly dispels the darkness of the night, the fair- coloured Shiva walked through the streets leaving footprints of his divinity behind. The great yogi took in the decadence and the poverty that gripped the village.

They stopped by the home of a poor farmer. His body was aching from the day's hard work. The crop had practically no yield in the last two seasons and he was mad at his wife for not serving him any meal. She was arguing that there was nothing to cook in the kitchen and they were fighting like they hated each other. The man went ahead and hit his wife.

The Devi shook in pain and disbelief. She was about to manifest and slay the man, but Shiva stopped her.

"Things are not what they seem, Uma," he said. "Nature must run its own

course.”

Just then the woman in a fit of rage took the sickle that she used everyday to cut the grass and hacked her husband’s hand. Unable to bear the pain, he howled and fell down unconscious.

“This man had usurped his brother’s land,” Shiva explained, “his own karma is coming back to him. And the lady, she had also earned today by selling hay. But, out of attachment, she gave it to her good-for-nothing son who’s currently sleeping with a prostitute.”

Devi knew that nothing was hidden from Shiva. She said nothing and simply followed him.

A few blocks down, they saw a bookkeeper tossing and turning in his bed. Suffering from severe insomnia, he was unable to fall asleep. Angered and helpless, he got up and downed half a bottle of alcohol so he could sleep. There was a depressing energy in his home. There was his wife, there were kids, they had resources, and yet the basic fabric of happiness – a sense of belonging – was missing altogether.

“Surely, this man doesn’t deserve sleepless nights,” Devi said, “he donates to the temple every month and he calls out to you every morning.”

“Things are not what they seem,” Shiva said benevolently.” He falsifies the financial records for his clients so they evade taxes. In turn, they pay him more.”

At Devi’s insistence, they visited numerous homes, even the palace of the king. Some were lonely, others were sad, some were quarrelling and some others plotting. Very few slept in peace, even fewer were awake in peace. Everyone was suffering in some way. Distraught at the sad human condition, Devi asked, “Why is man so unhappy, Lord? Is it because they always want more than

they have?”

“Evolution is the dharma of Nature,” Shiva said, getting into his meditative posture. “The desire to grow is ingrained in all living entities – from an ant to elephant, from a tiny seed to the giant banyan.”

“What good is this desire if they spend majority of their lives unhappily?”

“The desire in itself is not the problem. Man suffers because he’s too scattered.”

Devi sat quietly as she didn’t quite understand what Shiva meant by the word ‘scattered’.

“His consciousness is directed elsewhere and *prana*, life force, is directed elsewhere. His thoughts are going in a direction opposite to his actions. His mind wants one thing while his heart is striving for something completely different.

His energy is invested in endeavors conflicting with his emotions.

The reason man is unhappy is because his thoughts, speech and actions are not in harmony," Shiva continued, "Anything that is not in harmony in the play of nature is either eliminated completely or forced to align. Suffering is alignment."

"Forgive me for pressing on, *Nath*," Devi said, "but I feel it's pivotal for human welfare. Are you saying that the one, whose thoughts, speech and actions are in harmony, does not suffer?"

"To such a person, suffering will have no more impact than a cloth of silk rubbing against an elephant."

"Then how to harmonize?"

"Meditation, compassion and dispassion lead to liberation, O Devi!" Shiva looked at her lovingly out of his soft, still and compassionate eyes. "Nothing is impossible for the one who treads the path of meditation."

Meditation as passed down from the first meditator, Shiva, to an unbroken lineage of *siddhas* over countless years is what I share with you here. In the yogic tradition, Shiva is not a myth but the first guru.

The path of meditation I talk about is not just a feel-good five-minute exercise. It is a systematic approach to wipe off the tendencies that you've been carrying along with you over countless lifetimes. We get angry when we don't want to, we go astray even with all the right intentions. We cheat, we lie, we deceive, we put on a mask of falsity. We step out wearing a smile trying to impress others, aware but ignorant that they too are sailing in the same boat as us. Nevertheless, we say things we would rather not, we do things we'd better not. Why? Our tendencies fuel, if not create, our habits, desires and temperament. Someone with the tendency to dominate has the urge to gain more power. A person leaning towards the tendency of seeking attention feels the desire to have more fame. Someone with the natural tendency of possessiveness feels more jealous. A man born with the tendency to lack feels more envious than others.

Our proclivities, impressions of consciousness, or call them tendencies, are at the root of our desires. They propel us to take action. The results of our actions determine the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of our desires which further drive our emotions. And our emotional state makes us feel the way we do about ourselves, others and the world around us.

One day we feel powerful and the next we feel crippled. One moment we feel

over the moon and the next moment we are grief-stricken. It happens even if there's absolutely no change in our circumstances. With the same life, same partner, same job and what have you, on some days you feel happy and fulfilled while on another day, under the same set of circumstances, you feel utterly useless, maybe even suicidal. The see-saw of emotions sucks life out of the best of us, leaving us at the mercy of our thoughts and reactions. Confined to the four walls of the mind, the immense potential that each one of us has withers away with time. Very few are able to harness the power of the mind, unleash its secrets and lead a life of fulfillment and achievement. We the creatures of vast oceans resign to our fate in the well.

Meditation is about hopping out of the puddle of our negativity and jumping into the lake of bliss. True meditation is not just about stilling the mind. Even a good edge-of-the-seat thriller can still your mind for a couple of hours. Instead, meditation is straightening out the knots in the consciousness, it is about calming the tides of emotions and afflictions in the ocean of life. When you mend the fluctuations of your consciousness, you become a river that's merging in the sea. Individual consciousness then flows seamlessly into the supreme consciousness, a tiny drop is on its way to become the vast ocean. I look upon meditation as the medium to rise above our limited existence and reach out to the infinity of our potential,to shape an ordinary existence into an extraordinary one.

By consciousness, I don't mean some mystical or mythical concept. In very tangible words, consciousness is the flow of life. You experience its existence daily in the change in your thoughts, in your moods when on the outside nothing seem to have changed at all. This culmination of consciousness, or your tendencies, are not just from this lifetime alone.

If you don't believe in rebirth then this book will be of little use to you. As I said earlier, meditation to me is the most powerful tool to harness and channelize the restive and other tendencies of the mind we've been carrying with us over lifetimes.

Sometimes we act like wolves, at times like a lion, meek as a cow sometimes, soft as a deer, restless as a monkey or lazy as a lizard. We've been all that at some stage.

Yogic scriptures state that we simultaneously live in three types of space. They call it *bhuta-akasha*, physical space, *citta- akasha*, mental space, *cidda-akasha*, the space of consciousness.

The state of our mind, our mental space, determines how we perceive the physical space around us. If you are happy even average food tastes sumptuous

and if you are grumpy even the best food feels tasteless. We are willing to make a lot of compromises when we are happy. But what causes our happiness? What makes us feel light and full of life, and what makes us feel nothing is right even when there's no change in our circumstances? The answer is our state of consciousness.

Fluctuations in consciousness bring about an immediate change in our emotions and thoughts. Unless we experience freedom at all three levels, our happiness will always be temporary and incomplete. Such transient state of happiness will repeatedly throw us back into the throes of suffering.

Meditation is your way to silence the fluctuations in consciousness. To really feel, and put to use, your immense potential, you have to go beyond the incessant chattering of the mind. You have to clean the slate before you can inscribe your sacred existence on it. Meditation is the path – a systematic, methodical, scientific and artful path – to reach that bliss and potential. You have milestones to guide you along the way and a set of practices to help you produce the right conditions for effective and definitive results.

Each one of us is a master of infinite possibilities at a universal scale. Meditation is to experience your own magnificence, it is to live your potential. It is a state where joy and peace flows from every action you perform, every word you utter, every thought you contemplate. There are no shortcuts. The only way to taste the fruits of meditation is to do it right, to do it properly.

The ultimate bliss and beauty you experience upon reaching the final stage of meditation has been given various names including the awakening of the kundalini, *samadhi*, *nirvikalapa- samadhi*, even nirvana, and so on. I'm not interested in these labels, I never was. My sole focus is to shed light on the path of meditation as I walked it; complete with its trials and tribulations, rewards and outcomes. Must you go to the Himalayas to realize your potential? I would hold off answering this in a simple 'yes' or 'no' for now. Walk with me and you'll know the answer by the time you finish absorbing my words written herein.

There is the ordinary path and the extraordinary path. I will lay out both for you. Based on your own preferences, goal and ambition, you pick the one you like. Regardless of the nature, regime and system of your meditation, I can tell you one thing – meditation is the most scientific endeavor you can undertake to take yourself to a level unimaginable for the ordinary mind, to elevate your consciousness to the universal level, to experience how you are not the body but way beyond. The keyword here is 'experience'.

Without further ado, let's begin our journey of meditation by understanding

the nature of mind. For, we ought to know the proverbial nature of the beast before we can devise the ways of taming it.

yatroparamatecittaṁ niruddhaṁ yoga-sevayā,
yatracaivātmanātmānaṁ paśyannātmanituṣyati.

sukhamātyantikaṁ yat tad buddhi-grāhyamatīndriyam,
vettiyatranacaivāyaṁ sthitaścalatitattvataḥ.

yaṁ labdhvācāparaṁ lābhaṁ manyatenādhikaṁ tataḥ,
yasminsthitonaduḥkhenaguruṇāpivicālyate.

taṁ vidyādduḥkha-saṁyoga-viyogaṁ yoga-saṁjñitam[2]

In the stage of perfection called trance, or *samadhi*, one's mind is completely restrained from material mental activities by practice of yoga. This perfection is characterized by one's ability to see the self by the pure mind and to relish and rejoice in the self. In that joyous state, one is situated in boundless transcendental happiness, realized through transcendental senses. Established thus, one never departs from the truth, and upon gaining this he thinks there is no greater gain. Being situated in such a position, one is never shaken, even in the midst of greatest difficulty. This indeed is actual freedom from all miseries arising from material contact.

Mind, Thoughts and Actions

- ✧ The Nature of Mind
- ✧ The Journey of a Thought
- ✧ When Thoughts Become Desires
- ✧ When Desires Become Expectations
- ✧ When Thoughts Become Things

yo'yaṃyogastvayāproktaḥsāmyenamadhusūdana,
etasyāhaṃnapaśyāmicañcalatvātsthitiṃsthirām.

cañcalaṃ hi manaḥkṛṣṇapramāthibalavaddṛḍham,
tasyāhaṃnigrahaṃmanyevāyorivasuduṣkaram.[3]

O Krishna, says Arjuna, you talk about the equanimity of mind. To tell you the truth, I don't think it's practical or feasible. Mind is so powerful and wayward that I can imagine containing air by creating a vacuum with my arrows, but I can't possibly tame my mind so it thinks, acts and behaves the way I want it to.

The Nature of the Mind

Once upon a time, there was a lioness. She died during the course of giving birth to her cub. A small girl who had never seen a cub happened to be in the woods at the same time. She picked up the cub and brought it home. The cub was fed goat's milk and was made to live with other goats. They all grew up together. The lion started to feed on grass like the other goats and was treated no differently. Living like the cattle, it forgot its true nature.

One day, while grazing along with the herd, the lion got separated and found itself lost in the shadows of the jungle. As he attempted to navigate his way back, he went even deeper in the woods. He felt scared in the loneliness and unfamiliar territory. Just then, he saw a wolf from a distance. The lion, unaware of his own ferocity and out of ignorance, started running for life. However, much to his surprise, all the other animals started running away when they saw him approaching. The panting lion stopped to make sense of what had just witnessed. An eerie feeling took him over; there was more to it than what met the eye. The lion began pondering over the incident and decided to explore the matter further.

He moved around a little more freely and a little less scared. Wherever he went, he saw the same reaction: all the animals would start scrambling. It went on like this before he saw a group of lions feeding on a freshly killed bull's gore. A latent desire to partake of the meat aroused in him. His surprise elevated to the level of shock. As if automatically, he felt a strong desire to make his own lunch. Driven by his urge he hunted down a calf.

The joy he discovered in the hunting and feeding on the game far exceeded any other he had ever experienced. Moreover, an innate sense of fearlessness emerged. He felt the jungle was his home and that no one around could dare to kill him. In no time, from a meek grass feeding goat, he became the king of the jungle.

You are a lion as well, your intrinsic nature is bliss and fearlessness. But, the lion in you has started behaving like a goat. This is called conditioning. From the moment we are brought up, we are fed with beliefs and information about

ourselves and others. We are constantly made aware of our shortcomings. Somehow, we are made to believe that in order to be happy we have to constantly strive for something else, we have to do better, we have to be like someone else.

We have been conditioned, inadvertently or otherwise, by the society and other evolutionary forces. Our conditioned soul is a product of the collective intelligence of the world. We, as individuals, however, are a product of our karma and our desires.

This conditioning comes to us in the form of religious, social, familial and moral values. Since eons, preceding generations have accepted such standards, mostly unquestioningly, passing them onto the successive ones.

Our conditioning makes us feel we are inadequate, lacking something. As if we must constantly improve and strive for something. As a result, a perfectly beautiful life starts to feel inadequate as we start seeking external affirmations and approvals. You would think that your dress is amazing, or that you've got good grades, or that you sang really well. But if your peers and loved ones feel differently, you'd suddenly feel deflated like a balloon. Somehow, their disagreement would matter to you. Somewhere you would feel that our self-assessment is not as valuable as others' approval of you. This starts pretty early on during our childhood when we are constantly compared and ranked against others. At school, in college and then at work some third person is telling us what to or what not to do.

This leads to a mind that is eternally tossed between happiness and suffering, between pleasure and pain. The more we try to gel with the world outside and please others, somehow believing that others' acceptance of us is a validation of our own potential, the more we start to distance from our true nature. The transmission of signal by our soul becomes weaker and weaker as we continue to move away from our true self, our real nature. Increasingly, the lion starts to think, believe and behave like a goat.

The world you see externally is merely a projection of the world within you. In fact, the world outside is an exact replica of the one within you. Your inner world is a product of your thoughts. Due to your forgotten nature, your inner world constantly gets affected by the world outside. If the inner world is in turmoil, the outer world appears just as listless and doomed. This fluctuation of emotions is a constant affair in an ordinary mind.

"Man's mind," said Confucius, "is more treacherous than mountains and rivers, and more difficult to know than the sky. For with the sky you know what

to expect in respect of the coming of spring, summer, autumn and winter, and the alternation of day and night…”[5]

It needn’t be this way though. For behind every feeling and experience, there is the thought. Absence of thoughts, however, does not lead to absence of feelings. On the contrary, a still mind is like the tranquil lake, it’s like the calm ocean, an absolute beauty. For thoughts are the ripples in that lake, emotions are the waves in the ocean of mind. They remain inseparable though – waves from ocean.

You look at the whole and you see the parts. You understand the parts and you grasp the whole. If you get a grip on the anatomy, construction and nature of a thought, you’ll instantly understand all that there is to understand about mind. You will immediately realize why and how meditation helps you harness your mind leading to inner peace and bliss.

Maitreya: World-honored One, how does this cultivation [of meditation] produce the great insight?

Buddha: Good son, when they [aspirants] become aware of the six supports, they attain insight into the nature of thought. The first is that they know well the arising of thought. The second is that they know well the abiding of thought. The third is that they know well the departure of thought. The fourth is that they know well the increasing of thought. The fifth is that they know well the diminution of thought. The sixth is that they know well the methods. They know well the arising of thought, for they truly know the differences that engender thought in its sixteen activities, and this is what is meant by knowing well the arising of thought.[6]

The Journey of a Thought

A **young man goes** into the confessional box and says, “Bless me Father, for I have sinned. I have missed Mass twice and

I slept with a girl.”

“Is that you, Josh Worth?” “Yes, Father.”

“Who was this girl you were with?”

“I’m sorry, Father, but I can’t take her name to protect her reputation.”

“Was it Katherine O’Brien?” The priest guessed because it was a small community and everyone knew everyone.

“No Father”. “Mary Board?” “No Father.”

“Was it Fiona James?”

“No Father! I can’t tell you.”

“I appreciate your determination to protect her, son,” the priest says, “but you must atone for your sins. Your penance will be four Hail Marys.”

Josh runs out to his friends who ask him, “What did you get?” “I got three very good leads!” he replies triumphantly. “Will

go and call Katherine first.”

Thoughts are never a problem until you act on them. Thoughts of lust, negativity, jealousy, envy, hatred, possessiveness are normal. For, an average human mind gets more than 60,000 thoughts in a span of 24 hours. It is but natural that a number of those thoughts are going to be undesirable. Having a bad thought doesn’t make you a bad person. No one can escape impure thoughts. We don’t have any control over our thoughts. Any thought can come and hit us from any direction. But what we do have control over is whether we want to pursue that thought or if we want to turn it into an action.

There’s no one on this planet who has never had an immoral or impure thought. Having such thoughts don’t make anyone bad, for thoughts are not good or bad, right or wrong, moral or immoral, they are just thoughts. They take one or the other form based on how we pursue and deploy them. Let’s say, you are passing through the woods and you come across a dry and thin branch of a tree lying on the ground. You can use it as a walking stick, or as firewood, or to

protect yourself, or, hopefully not, even to beat up some poor animal. What you do with the stick determines whether it is good or bad. On its own, the stick has little meaning. Similarly, the wise don't feel guilty for having unwelcome thoughts. They know they don't have to act on them. And by action, I'm not just referring to physical actions but mental ones too. When we cling to a thought or follow its track, we are performing a mental karma, and that, in turn, is the seed of all physical actions.

Good meditators, or even mindful people, transcend their thoughts by simply watching them. Most thoughts are random and fickle; they are not worth pursuing. Upon close examination, you will discover that thoughts are highly ephemeral and if you don't hold on to them, they disappear exactly like bubbles in water. Whenever you are bothered by any lingering thought, simply ask yourself the following three questions and watch it become feeble in no time:

1. From where has this thought originated?
2. Where is it traveling?
3. Where has it disappeared?

As you ponder on these, you begin to understand the anatomy of a thought; basically, its emptiness. They are empty. Thoughts have no definitive point of origin, no set course of travel, and no specific site of disappearance. When you see an object in a mirror, you can classify the sight as beautiful or ugly, desirable or otherwise but what happens when the mirror faces another mirror, when it looks at its own reflection, what will it see? The reflection will keep bouncing off each other infinitely. Similarly, when the mind examines itself, it starts to disappear in its own vast existence.

> Mists rise from the earth and vanish into space.
> They go nowhere, nor do they stay.
> Likewise, though thoughts arise,
> Whenever you see your mind, the clouds of thinking clear.
>
> Space is beyond colour or shape.
> It doesn't take on colour, black or white: it doesn't change.
> Likewise, your mind, in essence, is beyond colour or shape.
> It does not change because you do good or evil.
>
> The darkness of a thousand eons cannot dim
> The brilliant radiance that is the essence of the sun.
> Likewise, eons of samsara cannot dim
> The sheer clarity that is the essence of your mind.

Although you say space is empty,
You can't say that space is "like this".
Likewise, although mind is said to be sheer clarity,
There is nothing there: you can't say "it's like this".

Thus, the nature of mind is inherently like space:
It includes everything you experience.

Stop all physical activity: sit naturally at ease.
Do not talk or speak: let sound be empty, like an echo.
Do not think about anything: look at experience beyond thought.

Your body has no core, hollow like bamboo.
Your mind goes beyond thought, open like space.
Let go of control and rest right there.[7]

Just like two pieces of wood can be rubbed together to produce fire and the same fire later consumes them both, intellect and concentration support the contemplative meditation. But when the fire of insight arises, it consumes both intellect and concentration, giving way to pristine awareness. This is the ultimate state for a meditator – not only understanding the nature of thoughts and rising above them, but living in complete awareness.

Like waves in the ocean disappear in the same sea they had originated from, thoughts emerge from and merge back into the same mind. Some start to surf these waves, but no matter how giant or exhilarating a wave, how beautiful the swell, how tidal the sea, how expert the surfer, the waves will toss him eventually. And this brings me to the moral of the story: there are no calming thoughts really, just like there are no stable waves.

A thought that's appeasing today could well be disturbing tomorrow. For example, you love someone today and their thought brings you joy, but tomorrow you may fall out of love and those same thoughts of them will give you grief. A good meditator knows that thoughts, at their best, can only calm the mind temporarily and intermittently.

In the ocean of your mind, when it comes to the waves of thoughts, you have three choices: first, surf and accept the highs and lows; second, watch the waves and put up with the constant sound of the sea; and third, move away from the ocean altogether.

The lifespan of every thought, however good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, is exactly the same.

It emerges. It manifests. It disappears.

These are the only three stages in the life of a thought. If you don't recall a

thought or if you don’t pay attention to a thought, it must disappear on its own.

Thoughts that you do not let go leave an imprint on your mind.

That imprint is the residue. Meditation is the process of washing away that residue. It is the cleaning of your slate and keeping it that way. When we fail to abandon our thoughts, they assume different forms. They can become desires, expectations or emotions.

lagatā nahīṃ hai jī merā ujaḍae dayāra meṃ
kisa kī banī hai ālama-e-nāpāyedāra meṃ

kaha do ina hasaratoṃ se kahīṃ aura jā baseṃ
itanī jagaha kahāṁ hai dila-e-dāgadāra meṃ

umra-e-darāja māṁga kara lāye the cāra dina
do ārajaū meṃ kaṭa gaye do intajao āarameṃ

kitanā hai badanasība "japhara" daphana ke liye
do gaja jamīna bhī na milī kū-e-yāra meṃ.[8]

I no longer like living in this world. O desires, go find a home elsewhere, I no longer have room for you in my wounded heart. Out of my short life of four days, I've spent two in anticipation and two in waiting. How unfortunate I am that I couldn't even find a place of burial in my beloved's heart.

When Thoughts Become Desires

There's a beautiful story in *Durga Saptashati*, a puranic text. While slaying the demons, Mother Goddess came across a particularly different and difficult type. His name was Raktabija, the one who is born from blood. Raktabija had a special boon. For every drop of his blood that would fall on the ground, one thousand more Raktabijas would manifest, and each new Raktabija would have the same boon. It was practically impossible to exterminate such a demon. As soon as he was attacked, blood would spill and thousands like him would spring forth, creating armies after armies of Raktabija in the battlefield. It was a problem unlike any other that the Goddess had encountered

A long battle ensued, after which the companion energies of Mother Goddess decided that just attacking Raktabija wasn't enough. There had to be someone to gather and drink his blood before it spilled on the ground. A form of the goddess, Ma Kali, emerged from the forehead of the goddess. Before Raktabija's blood could touch the ground she would lap it up with her lolling tongue. Eventually the forces of goodness triumphed over the demons.

Similar is the case with our desires, for Raktbija was nothing but a symbol of desire. For every desire we humans fulfill, a thousand more will take birth. Suppressing them is the same as attacking them. That's not the solution. Fulfilling them is accepting your defeat at their hands, giving birth to a thousand more. Ma Kali emerging out of Devi's forehead represents mindfulness. When we are mindful of our thoughts, actions and desire, they subside on their own.

Look around and you'll see how each one of us is driven by our desires. The kingdom of consciousness is under siege by the desires of our mind. All that we have accumulated or hope to achieve has originated from our desires. Our unfulfilled desires froth, ferment and layer up on the tranquil surface of our mind. Unless we understand the nature of our desires, we have no hope of winning over them, they can't be tackled individually.

They are Raktabija. We have to go to the source if it is peace and everlasting bliss we seek.

Going to the source is understanding the nature of your desires. The seed of a

desire is thought. That's the *bija*, seed, of this Raktabija.

Just like moisture is inseparable from water, and, heat from light, desires are inseparable from mind. For desires are but thoughts 'un-abandoned'. And, thoughts are just that – thoughts.

They are neither good nor bad, neither sublime nor ridiculous, neither right nor wrong. All such labels are mere designations you have given them based on your conditioning. Intrinsically, thoughts are all the same – identical. It is what you do with the thought that matters than the actual thought itself.

When a thought emerges on the canvas of your mind, if you don't drop it, its pursuit will either take the form of a desire or an emotion, positive or negative. All karma originate from thoughts. A lingering thought destabilizes your mind, disturbing your state of tranquility like the ripple in a still pond. A quiet mind remains unaffected by the fulfillment or abandonment of desires; both outcomes are perceived by the mind anyway. So, whether you want sense gratification or gratifying recognition, satisfying love or a simple *laddoo*, as far as mind is concerned, there is no difference.

When a desire is fulfilled, it gives you temporary joy and pleasure. The outcome is as ethereal and elusive as the desire itself. If desires could be satisfied forever, it would not be fallacious to seek fulfillment. However, when fulfilled, countless more spring up like Raktabija. Once you understand the nature of desires, your life is simplified. While desires cannot really be classified, to aid ease and understanding, I am categorizing them for you. They are primarily of four types:

Physical Desires

All forms of sense gratifications are pure physical desires. You envisage a pleasant outcome from the fulfillment of these ones. Such anticipated pleasure prompts you to hold onto the thought of satisfying your desire. As a result, your actions, emotions and intelligence work together to attain that fulfillment. These desires can be insatiably active or eternally latent in you, or sometimes both. Whatever you enjoy through the body is basically sense gratification.

Most people expend their whole life satisfying these ones.

They experience everything through the body, live for the body and die for it. They remain faithful, obedient and unquestioning servants of the body. Their life revolves around the body's needs for food, clothing, copulation, comfort, care and so forth. Fulfillment of physical desires is fundamentally linked to a body's

well-being. Human body, however, continues to deteriorate and many work incessantly hard to maintain it.

It is not wrong to fulfill physical desires. It's just that everything we pursue has a price. If you are willing to pay that price, by all means you are welcome to go after these desires. Fulfillment of physical desires, however, rarely ever leads to everlasting happiness. There's transient pleasure that fades as quickly as the skies clear after a heavy shower. When we continually work to feed our senses, driven by our physical desires, our emotional desires too multiply automatically. And this leads me to explaining the second type:

Emotional Desires

Emotional desires are directly linked to your conditioning (you may think of it as upbringing for now) and karmic residue from previous lifetimes. These are driven by our mind's tendencies that we have been carrying over millions of lifetimes. Have you not noticed why everyone has a desire for a certain type of partner in their life? The same person who appeals to you as your soulmate could be downright repulsive for someone else. Emotional desires spring from the deepest recesses of the mind. These are not just the thoughts you've contemplated on consciously. They have arisen from the impressions of the subconscious. The deep desire to feel loved, to feel wanted. Need for love, reciprocation, recognition, appreciation, companionship and sharing, etc., form the tall list of emotional desires.

As with all things, there's a price to be paid for the attainment of emotional desires as well. Most notably, these desires impel you to look outside for fulfillment. You need 'somebody' for companionship, sharing, hand-holding and so on. Since you search outside for inner fulfillment, you set out on a quest comparable to ranging the universe from one end to the other. Till your last breath, you continue to play a puppet to this quest – forever trying to please the other person, to keep him happy, to keep craving for love and so on. It gets very tiring after a while. Physical desires may subside when body grows weak and old, but emotional desires remain alive and kicking. A 60-year- old woman and a 16-year-old girl may have the same desire to be loved and appreciated; with age the body grows feeble but not necessarily the mind. On the path of meditation, emotional desires arise when you forget your true nature, when you lose sight of the fact that you are already complete in every sense of the word.

The term 'emotional needs' is a misnomer. Emotions are a product of the

conditioned mind and as such mind has no needs.

The sight of a slaughterhouse may trigger a negative emotion in you, whereas it may be positive for the business owner and neutral for the machine operator. It all depends on how you are conditioned.

Intellectual Desires

After you've had your fill of wealth, sex and companionship, your mind goes looking for something else. A conditioned mind, outwardly focused, when temporarily satisfied from the fulfillment of physical and emotional desires, gives birth to intellectual ones. Intellectual desires prompt the individual to create something new or to engage in seemingly selfless social causes. Fulfillment from these desires lasts longer than the first two ones. When all else is going well, and when you feel that sense gratification and emotional fulfillment are not enough, these ones take birth.

Fulfillment of any form of desire, be it physical, emotional or intellectual does not offer lasting fulfillment either. They continue to bind you predominantly because you have simply engaged your mind elsewhere rather than settling it. Pursuit of these desires creates something valuable for the society though. Creating a charitable organization, working towards a material or spiritual discovery, devoting to a social or a religious cause are examples of intellectual desires. Better than the first two, these help you turn inward. The greatest thinkers, inventors and scientists were the products of pursuing their intellectual desires.

Transcendental Desire

Sometimes, a rare few sit down and reflect on their lives; they question the real meaning of life. Realizing that you can't just be running around fulfilling your desires to have glimpses of happiness, one day you sit down to take a hard look at your life. Now you are searching for the meaning of your life. You refused to be tossed around in the endless pursuit of desires. This reflection is the seed of the finest form of desire – transcendental desire.

Unlike the other three, this one is always in singular. When the only burning desire to discover your true nature remains, half the work is done. Chances are you have this desire because you have realized the futility of gratifying infinitely insatiable desires of the first three types. Fulfillment of the transcendental desire frees you from the fetters of ignorance, removing all shackles of conditioning.

Desire of this nature is the ultimate quest of discovering your own truth. Without saying much, you could be Krishna, Christ, Buddha, Mahavir or any of the greatest preachers, prophets or thinkers the world has ever seen.

Have you noticed how when our desires are not fulfilled, we feel low, broken, dejected, hurt and sometimes completely shattered? We work very hard so we may feed them but many more keep on arising. The moment you buy a car, you start looking at more expensive ones. As soon as you have a house, you start dreaming of a bigger one. This may not be wrong, but this does take us away from enjoying our lives in a more lasting and befitting manner.

Good meditation teaches you how to drop your thought. The moment you drop your thought, desire vanishes in thin air like a dewdrop upon sunrise. With practice you learn to take your mind off each time a desire arises, especially undesirable ones, the ones that become temptations have the potential to completely throw you off the course. As you progress, you actually start to see you desires as mere thoughts with no intrinsic value. To detect emergence of thoughts requires an ever-present and alert mind – quite like the security system at the airport that beeps even if you walk through it with a penny in your pocket.

You don’t have to be alarmed when desires come knocking, they are only natural. They are attractive fruits on the mind tree, sumptuous, luscious, shiny fruits waiting to be plucked. How many can you clip or pluck after all or can you? One day you’ll need to get to the root. And the root of the desire tree is aptly called mind. Expectations are the illegitimate children – with desires as their step-siblings – of an ignorant mind and conditioned self. If you get married to a desire, be ready to pay child support for a very long time to come. They keep us entangled. They keep us engaged in meaningless pursuits for a long time, till one day it’s too late to change the course of our lives.

Not every lingering thought becomes a desire though. Some become expectations and some take the form of an emotion.

āḍhyo 'bhijanavān asmi ko 'nyo 'sti sadṛśo mayā,
yakṣye dāsyāmi modiṣya ity ajñāna-vimohitā.ḥ[9]

The deluded one thinks "I'm great, like no other. I'm the doer, I help people, I do charity and therefore the world owes me something." He lives in such ignorance.

When Desires Become Expectations

Even though our desires are endless and we remain busy chasing them throughout our lives, it is not their pursuit that is burdensome. It is our belief that our desires must be fulfilled or that our happiness depends on the fulfillment of our desires.

This creates a baggage of a different kind. It's the heaviest load but an invisible one. We remain unaware of its weight as well as oblivious to its continuous build up.

From the moment you can recall to the present one, it has been on your consciousness. You have accepted it implicitly like a citizen accepts the laws of the country of residence. It is an unequivocal, silent and unconditional acceptance. If you haven't guessed it already, I am referring to the huge weight of expectations. You may believe that you don't have any or that you have only the basic and realistic ones. Think again, I urge you, after going through the following section.

When a lingering thought is not abandoned, it becomes a desire. When we contemplate on the fulfillment of desire and feel that it is our right to see it fulfilled, that somehow we deserve it – it becomes an expectation. For example, it's 4 PM and you are sitting at work, partly bored and partly engaged in your assignment. Out of nowhere, an image of a nice meal crosses your mind. Rather than dropping the thought of food, you pursue it and soon find yourself craving for a good dinner when you get home. This is desire. Let's say your wife is a homemaker and a good cook. Since she's your wife and looking after the home, you 'expect' to be served a good meal for dinner. Or maybe you expect this way because you saw your mother or grandmother doing it when you were growing up. Or perhaps you expect it because you feel it's the basic right of a husband. That's what expectations are: desires with rights attached to them.

You get home and announce at the door, "Honey, I'm home!" You are 'expecting' a warm welcome, a hot meal. But Honey is not exactly sweet and welcoming today. Maybe she just found out that the dress she bought for Rs. 5,000 last week is on sale today for Rs. 2,700. You announce again but she tells

you to stop shouting. What happens next is better left to your imagination.

Expectations are those desires you believe you have the right to see fulfilled. Due to our own conditioning by numerous factors, we develop expectations. They are the primary cause of all grief and stress. When we expect, we place a burden on ourselves as well as the one we expect from.

Different Kinds of Expectations

Lingering thoughts that we pursue and contemplate on become the building blocks of our world. Cemented in attachment, we keep erecting the walls of desires around us eventually finding ourselves completely trapped with no escape doors. Expectations are not just what we have from others or what they have from us. They are of three types in fact, and all three arise when we fail to drop the thought that seeded it at the first place.

From Self

The expectations we have from ourselves are at the root of our grief. We expect ourselves to be disciplined, calm, together, always caring and so on. But when we procrastinate, get angry, indulge immorally or act selfishly, somewhere we feel guilty. Even if no one was hurt or harmed in the process, we still feel bad. Primarily because we have certain expectations from ourselves and we failed to fulfill them. The troubling thing is that not all these expectations are right. Most of these have been handed down to us by our society, teachers, parents, peers, religion and so on.

Based on your education, *samskara*, upbringing, your social circle and your professional life – all of which play an important role in your conditioning – you expect yourself to be a certain way before others. You have set for yourself certain benchmarks and standards derived out of information passed onto you in many forms; normally based on the religion you practice and the company you keep in addition to other social and personal factors.

When these expectations, the ones you have from yourself, are not met, they give birth to shame and guilt. You feel low and tormented. In a state of as much denial as disbelief, you feel miserable and lost. You eternally stay buried under these expectations, majority of which is a big load of rubbish. With mindfulness you can filter them, keeping the ones that strengthen your consciousness and make you a more compassionate person.

From Others

Our second big load of expectations come from our relationships with others. We justify the expectations we have from others believing that we rightfully deserve to be treated a certain way; whether it is in the form of reciprocation, love, things, words, gestures. Based on all that you have observed and absorbed, all that you have been told and taught, and all that you feel you have done, you desire a certain outcome, often favourable. Because you feel what you desire is legitimate, just and natural, you add to the burden of expectations. The beauty and love in most relationships gets crushed under the weight of expectations. If the two partners in a relationship could lower their expectations they have from each other, love in such a relationship will only flourish.

Expectations put pressure on the one you expect from, all the while increasing your own burden of expectations. When these expectations are not fulfilled, they give you grief and disappointment proportionate to the magnitude of your expectations. Make a list of all the people you care about and what all you expect from them. When done, know that they expect just as much from you. You relinquish yours and with your purified energy they will accept you the way you are, gradually lowering their own expectations from you. That’s how nature works.

Others’ from You

Anybody you know has some form of expectation from you. Even those, whom you don’t know but are connected to you in some way, somehow expect you to be a certain way. Your priest, government, fellow citizens, strangers on the road – they all expect you to be a certain way. If you accidentally bump into a stranger, you are expected to apologize. You are expected to dress in a civilized manner. These expectations are there so the society remains in order, but the world doesn’t take it too kindly if you break them.

You are under constant pressure from peers, bosses, friends and family. You have laid your burden on them and they have laid their burden on you. Whether or not you fulfill their expectations, just being aware of the fact that they expect from you is generally sufficient to stress out most people. Expectations disturb tranquility. I am not saying they are good or bad, or that you should let go of them. I’m simply bringing to the fore the impact expectations have on people’s lives. From the perspective of a meditator, an expectation is merely a desire we are holding onto. Our ego thinks we must see through this lingering thought.

When ego clings to a desire, it transforms into an expectation.

When we are unable to let go of our thoughts, some of them become emotions, and then we attach emotions to our desires and expectations. This is where a thought is transformed into a potent force nudging us to take action. Emotions are the giant killer waves that knock the surfer off his surfboard. They influence the nature of and intention behind our actions. And action, I may add, is the final stage of a thought, for the life of a thought ends where action starts.

Manopubbangama dhamma
manosettha manomaya
manasa ce padutthena
bhasati va karoti va
tato nam dukkhamanveti
cakkamva vahato padam.[10]

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage... If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.

When Thoughts Become Things

Mulla Nasrudin went to a department store to buy a pullover for his wife. While he was at the checkout counter, a flash sale was announced offering 40 percent discount to customers who paid within the next 60 minutes. Soon, out of nowhere an army of female customers rushed to the counter and Mulla found himself getting pushed and pulled in various directions.

He tried to be patient and polite but even at the end of one hour, he was still at the end of the line because of the wild crowd. Upset and frustrated, he stuck out his elbows and started pushing his way through all the women around.

"Don't you have any manners?" a lady yelled. "Can't you act like a gentleman?"

"No, ma'am," Mulla said loudly, "I've been acting like a gentleman for more than an hour. Now, I must act like a lady."

Why are we sometimes forced to behave in a manner which is contrary to our nature? It may seem that external circumstances propel us. The truth is we imagine our life a certain way and when things don't pan out how we envisaged, we feel sad, frustrated or depressed. Our restless mind then prods us to act so we may get what we want. Note two important words here, 'imagine' and 'want'. Imagination is nothing but pursuit of a train of thoughts. When we contemplate on a thought, we are basically imagining. And when the same thought stays, it becomes a desire or an emotion. For, a want is a desire which again is a lingering thought. Why are some people more prone to negative or lusty thoughts than others, for instance? It mostly boils down to our tendencies of the mind. Patanjali gives the most beautiful definition of tendency in his *Yoga Sutra*.

> *kleśamūlaḥkarmāśayodṛṣṭādṛṣṭajanmavedanīyaḥ*[11]
>
> Psychic imprints, resulting from karma, accumulated over many lives condition the mind and cause one grief.

The word karma here is meant to signify action and not destiny. Imagine a spinning wheel painted with bright spectral hues. Since it is spinning its face

appears illusory white. In reality, there is no white colour on the wheel. It's the momentum, speed at which it's spinning that's creating the illusion of white when the reality is far more vivid and colourful. Similarly, mind is always moving. Like the spinning wheel, it creates an illusion of reality of the material world. It makes the world look like a permanent place. However, that is not so.

In knowing your true nature, the one independent and cleared of all conditioning, your mind must acquire certain stillness. To attain that stillness and examine the nature of mind, its movement must cease. It must stop spinning. It is only after such cessation that you can see the real colours. With an ever moving mind, we remain oblivious to the impact of our actions. Every action leaves behind a residual trail. Whatever we do with speech, actions or words, leave an imprint on our mind and in our lives. This realization, however, comes to a still mind, a mindful mind. A sprinter running a race has no time to sit down and see what others are doing. He's too busy getting to the finish line. Similarly, a mind engaged in reckless pursuits has no time to reflect on its own actions.

Action, further is of three types and each one leaves behind an imprint based on its type. Physical actions may produce tangible residue whereas verbal and mental karma create psychic imprints.

The residue of karma may fade over a period of time (sometimes lifetimes) but it doesn't completely get destroyed unless you consciously work on erasing the imprint. Our actions don't condition us, their residue does. How? Let me walk you through with an example while elaborating on the three types of karma.

Physical Karma – Tangible Residue

All physical actions requiring touch are physical karma. Physical karma leaves behind physical residue. Let us say you have an apple. You peel and deseed it to enjoy better taste. You eat the apple leaving the skin and seeds behind. Your action of eating the fruit has resulted in the residue of apple skin and seeds. You dispose of the uneaten parts. A cow comes and gladly accepts that as its food. The residue you left behind has now impacted someone else you may not even know. That apple you consumed is now in your body. It is processed by your digestive system. Two sets of residues are formed. The one that gets absorbed in your body is now traveling in your veins by way of blood and the unabsorbed portion (read: residue) is let out of your physical system by way of urine and faeces. Further, bacteria and other microorganisms may feed on such excreta.

Your physical karma of eating an apple has left an imprint on you and other lifeforms. The residue from the apple that is in your blood directly affects your physical health. The residue eaten by the cow has a bearing on its health and on the quality of milk it produces. The excrements from your body have an impact on microorganic life forms as well as the environment.

Now imagine seven billion humans on the planet doing that. Further, envision billions of other living creatures in the equation. The physical world is a residue of the collective karma. It is the residue that matters. Your physical karma has a telling impact on you and your immediate surroundings. Plus, it has an impact on the whole world. It is for this reason that the path of meditation requires a degree of self-discipline and restraint. No matter how miniscule an action, eventually it will impact everyone in the world.

Verbal Karma – Psychic Imprint

An instruction, statement, question, or anything else you utter is verbal karma. All verbal karma leave behind psychic residue. Words uttered by you have a great impact on your mind and consciousness as well as on the mind of those at the receiving end. A conditioned mind is supported and driven by psychic imprints. It is relatively easy to clean up physical residue but psychic residue takes much greater effort.

Let us go back to the example of the apple. Assume you are a person of fine taste and you are eating an apple. The apple is delicious, fresh and crunchy with perfect sweetness. You remark about its taste and how you have never had such an amazing apple. A few weeks later you may not recall the taste of the apple but you are likely to remember what you had said at the time of consumption. In fact, anytime anyone else is going to make a similar remark about other fruits, it may remind you of that apple. And here is the interesting point: had you not uttered anything while eating that apple, it would be much easier for you to forget about the apple. Why? Because you left no psychic imprint beyond the taste and sight of the fruit.

Mental Karma – Emotional Imprint

The subtlest and most powerful of the three karma is a mental karma. It leaves behind a longer trail, a form of psychic residue that I call an emotional imprint. It’s the hardest to erase. The origin of all karma of any type is a thought. Pursuit of a thought is mental karma. It has an immediate impact on your mental state, a

lasting impact on your consciousness and an everlasting effect, however subtle, on your mind. Once again, let us go back to our example of apple. This time, you do not have the apples with you. The thought of an apple crosses your mind. You do not drop that thought. Instead, you start to pursue it.

From the original thought of the apple, you are recalled of the time you last had an apple. That thought may link you to the thought of you buying apples from a shop. Just note that the initial thought about the apple has now been replaced with that about the shop. The shop owner's picture and communication flashes in front of you. You recall giving money to the seller. You are reminded of another customer, who was shopping for bananas, standing next to you. You further recall how she was carefully picking the bananas and her physical attributes. You are now reminded of her statements, her voice and how she paid to the shop owner. You may experience love, lust, or some positive emotion arising in you.

You are tossed back to the thought of the shopkeeper because he returns you the change with your bag of apples. You take the bag and start walking. You are now reminded of the market conditions. You may further recall some unpleasant incident that happened one time in the market. This shopping cart had scratched your car. You feel angry and frustrated that how could some people be so inconsiderate and on and on and on…

Had you dropped the thought of the apple at the very moment it emerged, you would not have gone through the grind of mental karma. And all this depends on your memory. If only you had remembered that thoughts are empty in their own right and that you didn't have to pursue them, you would have not felt any negativity at events of the past over which you have no control in the present moment.

Memory plays a pivotal role in correct meditation. When you are able to retain only a part of your memory – that is, the object of meditation – you move towards achieving the tranquil state. However, memory is also your greatest hurdle in meditating correctly. Primarily because your memory is an accumulation, a storage tank, of your psychic imprints. Simply put, memory is the residue I've talked about.

> *anubhūtaviṣayāsaṃpramoṣaḥsmṛtiḥ*[12]
>
> A function of consciousness, memory is the unaltered collection of words and experiences.

It is not possible to empty your memory store. However, it is possible to drop the

thought as soon as it starts to emerge. That leads to a state of non-recollection. When you hold your mind in the tranquil absorptive state, afflictions from psychic imprints start to fade.

Your mind operates on the famous computing principle of GIGO – garbage in, garbage out. If you do ill, speak ill and think ill, the residue is going to leave you sick. If you do well, speak well and think well, the outcome is going to be well. Excess of anything results in excess residue. The more you eat, the greater the inventory, the bigger the headache of managing it. Imagine having a warehouse stocked up with unnecessary widgets. Your mind is a warehouse. Do you really wish to stock it up with useless stuff? Watch what you do, say, and think, transformation will begin automatically.

A mind that has gone empty fills with love naturally. An empty mind is not a devil's workshop. A restless mind is. An empty mind is infact a meditator's nirvana. A mind that holds no grudges against anyone, no desires, no expectations is a hotbed of noble intentions. Good meditation naturally leads to that exalted state.

The Path of Meditation

- ✧ What Meditation is Not
- ✧ What is Meditation
- ✧ Four Stages of Mental Stillness
- ✧ Six Principles of Meditation

yuktāhāravihārasya yuktaceṣṭasya karmasu,
yuktasvapnāvabodhasya yogo bhavati duḥkhahā.[13]

Moderation is the key. The right path to unite with the supreme source means to live a balanced life. A life where you eat, sleep, rest, enjoy and work in moderation. The middle way alone can help one get across the samsara with grace.

What Meditation is Not

"**What have you gained** from meditation?" someone asked Mahavira, founder of Jainism, a contemporary of Buddha and equally enlightened.

"I have gained nothing actually," the sage said smilingly. "But, I've lost much including my anger, pride, lust and misconceptions." Start with the premise that meditation is not about gaining anything. The notion of gaining or losing is a rather material (and not spiritual) way of thinking. Spirituality is not bothered with losing or acquiring. The right action for the greater good of

our universe is its only concern.

I don't wish to portray meditation as a solution to all your problems, that won't be fair. Even the closest disciples of Buddha, who meditated diligently, fought amongst themselves, remaining clueless and oblivious all their lives to the teachings of the great Buddha. Meditation never was or will be a substitute for virtuous conduct. Before I share with you what is meditation, it is absolutely critical that I tell you what meditation is not.

A few thousand years ago, there was a tribe in India. No one in the tribe had ever ventured outside their small community.

The other unique thing about that tribe was that no one had ever tasted salt. They didn't know what salt was or that it had anything to do with food.

Once a traveller, a rich merchant, lost his way in the woods and ended up in their community. The members of the tribe were shocked to see someone dressed so differently, wearing gems and jewels. This was markedly different from the banana leaves covering their privates. The traveler smelled nicely of exotic scents. They didn't know such things existed. The chief hosted the merchant, who was in turn taken aback when he ate their meals. He kept asking for salt and they said there was no such thing. Not knowing the customs, the merchant thought it was best not to press them for salt. At least, there were bananas that tasted as they should. He enjoyed their hospitality for a few days and while departing, extended an invitation to the chieftain. He promised that he would send someone to personally travel with the chief.

Surely enough, three months later, the merchant's people came to take the

chief to their village. They crossed the woods, travelled through many villages, got on a boat and journeyed through a long river before finally reaching the merchant. The chief was welcomed with open arms and the merchant gave him the best room to stay. Musicians, dancers and courtesans entertained him. He was served the best wine, the finest fruits.

The real surprise, however, came when he tasted the meal. It tasted a million times better than anything he'd ever had.

"There's something special about this food," he exclaimed. "It's so fulfilling. I don't know how to put it but even though our food looks the same, that has no taste compared to your food.

This must be the food that the gods eat."

The merchant was very pleased with the praise and asked that the chief be served another helping of the dishes. Each bite the guest took, he couldn't help but be amazed. All kinds of surreal tastes tickled his taste buds as he relished every single bite of the sumptuous meal. After the meal was over, he requested that he be given a tour of the kitchen where this heavenly food had been prepared. The merchant gladly led the chief into the kitchen.

There he examined each ingredient, every spice and when he got to salt, he was intrigued for he had only seen white sugar but never white salt. He tasted it and jumped in joy.

"Eureka!" he shouted, "this is it! This was the taste in my meal. What is it, my friend? Tell me, I must carry this back home to my people."

"Oh this? It's just salt."

Instantly the merchant understood the tasteless meals he had to force down his throat back in his guest's village. The village folk had never tasted salt. The chief still excited about his discovery asked him how much salt they put in the food.

"Generally, a teaspoon full. It depends on the quantity of the food."

"Wow!" The chief exclaimed. "You know what, don't worry about the meal. I'll just eat salt now. If a pinch of it made the meal so tasty, I wonder what a bowl full would taste like."

"Sir, it'll be repulsive!"

Ignoring the host's warning he put his mouth to the bowl of salt and took a mouthful, only to spit a moment later, cursing and crying for water.

"Salt is used to enhance the taste of the meal, my friend," the merchant said giving him a class of water. "It's not the meal in itself."

Similarly, meditation is not the meal. It is the salt in your meal.

The salt of meditation is designed to accentuate the taste of the meal called life. It can't replace life, it can't be your life. On the other hand, it needs to be taken in the correct quantity so you may enjoy your life. It does not go in desserts, but only in your entrees and main course.

What I mean to say is that the bliss promised from meditation cannot come from just meditation alone. It is not a substitute for love, compassion, humility, empathy and other virtues. Meditation is simply one of the methods to mould yourself into the person you wish to be, a process that can help you discover your primal state of peace and bliss.

Meditation is a way of life.

It is not a panacea, meditation is not the answer to everything. It cannot help you regain lost love or limbs. It won't set everything right in your life. Even when you are in supreme bliss, it doesn't mean that your stock or real estate investments won't go south, or that you will never meet with an accident or that your partner will never cheat on you. All of those things can and will still happen. What meditation will do to you is give you the grace and mindfulness to ease through life.

If you have a difficult boss or an abusive partner, your meditation will not change their nature, not directly anyway. It won't bring discipline or compassion in them. If your divinity could change others directly then Jesus of Nazreth, the messiah, would not have been crucified. If meditation was transformational then a hatemonger would not have poured melting glass in the ears of Mahavira.

Meditation is your personal journey, an intimate one. It is only about you. It does not change anything directly in others. Meditation remodels you so that you become a catalyst of positive change, not in your own life but in the lives of most of those who are connected with you. This is the only way meditation affects the lives of those around you. Gradually, the light in you starts to transform you. The way you think, act or react changes and that change, often (not always) brings a change in those around you.

These worthy rewards from meditation come from doing correct meditation and correct meditation alone. Not all that looks white is salt and if it is not salt, it will not add taste to your meal no matter how salt-like it may appear. Similarly, not all those who meditate are actually meditating – just sitting still is not meditation. Even chameleons and crocodiles can sit still for hours but they are not in meditation. Feeling relaxed after your meditation does not mean you meditated well and sleeping through your meditation is definitely not meditation.

If you wish to benefit from meditation, it has to be done correctly, accurately, just like Arjuna’s arrow pierced right through the eye of the fish.

yathā dīpo nivāta-sthoneńgate sopamā smṛtā,
yogino yata-cittasyayuñjato yogam ātmanaḥ.[14]

As the flame of a lamp does not flicker in a place devoid of wind, the mind of a yogi remains unflinchingly established in supreme bliss in state free of desires.

What is Meditation

Many years ago there was a widely reported incident in the news that a guard at the Guantanamo Bay military prison in Cuba allegedly flushed a detainee's holy book down the toilet. This had become a raging news item and numerous talk shows with pseudo-experts were hosted by various TV channels worldwide.

Amidst all that, a reporter in Australia phoned Ajahn Brahm, who was the abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery in Serpentine, Western Australia. The reporter was doing a feature taking statements from various religious heads.

"What will you do, Ajahn Brahm," the reporter asked, "if someone took a Buddhist book and flushed it down your toilet?"

The abbot answered, "Sir, if someone took a Buddhist holy book and flushed it down my toilet, the first thing I would do is call a plumber!"

They shared a brief laugh before the venerable Ajahn Brahm went on to say most beautifully, "Someone may blow up many statues of the Buddha, burn down Buddhist temples, or kill Buddhist monks and nuns. They may destroy all this, but I'll never allow them to destroy Buddhism. You may flush a holy book down the toilet, but I'll never let you flush forgiveness, peace and compassion down the toilet."[15]

This is meditation if you ask me. It is your ability to retain your virtues in the face of all adversities. This grace and presence of mind comes with correct practice of meditation. The journey of meditation has three important milestones. In the first stage, meditation is an act. You sit down and you train your mind to behave and be a certain way. It requires discipline and determination. Once you champion the art of meditation, you get to the second stage where it becomes your second nature. A sort of effortlessness arises in your meditation and the virtues, which you had to work hard to imbibe earlier, increasingly become a part of you. In the third stage, meditation becomes a state of your mind. You no longer *do* meditation, you are *in* meditation. A state of bliss that remains unperturbed under most circumstances. An altruistic sense arises naturally for the welfare of others, severing your attachments and bonds with all things

meaningless.

The final stage of meditation is liberation. Liberation from false beliefs, negativity, undesirable thoughts. It is freedom from guilt, resentment, jealousy, hatred and pride. Meditation is the music of soul that plays on effortlessly once you tread this path. In this book, I'll show you how to arrive at the final stage. However, if you wish to use meditation as a system to be calmer and more relaxed in your daily lives, it'll serve you just as well. My job is to give you the highest ideal and you are free to set your own goal and pick what interests you. There is the ordinary path and the extraordinary path to reach various stages in meditation. I'll walk you through both.

Ultimately, meditation is silence and presence of the mind. When your mind is at once silent and present, you are deep in meditation.

Two ladies met after a long time. They exchanged pleasantries and the following conversation ensued:

"How's your son?" one asked. "He's good."

"Has he found a job yet?"

"Nah, he's still unemployed but he does meditation these days."

"Meditation? What's that?"

"I don't know but I guess it's better than sitting around and doing nothing."

Doing Nothing – meditation is the art of doing nothing. You don't have to do anything per se, you don't have to get anywhere. You simply have to be in the present moment. It takes a great deal of practice to teach your mind to be alert and yet do nothing. In that moment, that moment when your mind is doing nothing and you are perfectly aware of it, gushes forth the fountain of bliss.

Away from the burdens of the world, meditation is not about reaching somewhere, it is not about improving according to societal definitions and beliefs. Meditation is about knowing and feeling that you are complete, perfect, whole.

The struggle to be somebody, the race to be something or be like somebody ends right in that quiet moment. To reach that quiet moment, to have that mental stillness like that of a calm, placid lake, you will go through four inevitable stages on the path of meditation.

yatroparamatecittaṁniruddhaṁ yoga-sevayā,
yatracaivātmanātmānaṁpaśyannātmanituṣyati.
sukhamātyantikaṁ yat tadbuddhi-grāhyamatīndriyam,
vettiyatranacaivāyaṁsthitaścalatitattvataḥ.[16]

With careful practice, a yogi practising meditation reaches a state of supreme bliss where he gets a glimpse of his own true nature. Having tasted that bliss, such a yogi remains established in pure bliss. Rising above distractions, his mind stops wandering aimlessly.

Four Stages of Mental Stillness

There was once a great master who also had the reputation of being as elusive as cryptic. Some thought he was a madman while many thought he was truly enlightened. He lived deep in the mountains in a cave accessible only to a few. A long treacherous trek through the slippery terrain discouraged most people from undertaking the arduous journey. And even those who did reach him wouldn't be accepted that easily as his disciple. Further, if he did initiate someone, that person would usually run away in the first week or two.

A seeker traveled for several days and nights to reach him.

"I want to learn meditation," he said bowing deeply before the master.

"Sure, I'll teach you."

The student couldn't believe his ears. He never thought it would be that easy to be accepted by his master.

"Put your bag away, wash your face and come sit next to me," the master said.

He followed the instructions and was quick to sit next to the master.

"Now what do I do?"

"You see that grass," the guru said pointing at the green field ahead.

"Yes, master."

"Just watch it grow."

The pupil looked at his master askance expecting that he would say more but nothing more came from his lips.

"And then what?" he questioned curiously. "Nothing. Just watch it grow."

"Are you serious?" the seeker exclaimed. "Have I traveled thousands of miles to watch grass grow? I thought you would teach me meditation."

"This is meditation, son," the master replied calmly. "If I say anything more, it would be just commentary. Be here, now."

"This is it?"

"This is it," the master replied calmly. "To see everything as it is requires perfect stillness of the mind. Silence is the way to meditation."

The teacher did not shift his gaze that was settled at a distant point in the

mountains.

“And what is the way to silence then?” “Meditation.”

“And how exactly do I meditate?” he said extremely frustrated. “Watch the grass grow.”

“You are truly mad,” the student yelled. “To hell with you. I’m out of here.”

He took his bag and moved to the exit.

“And where is here?” the master said smilingly.

The frustrated seeker screamed a few slurs, swore some more, put on his shoes and left that place.

It’s not easy – to be here now. To be in the present moment. You sit down to meditate and you are merrily meditating when you hear your phone buzz. You have decided to let nothing disturb your meditation.

I am not going to take that. It can wait.

A few moments pass and a voice in your head says, “Are you sure? It could be important.”

Whoever it is, they can wait.

“I admire your persistence, but let’s be honest, you are not going to be a Buddha in one day. It’s okay to get up and just see who it was.”

No, I’m meditating.

“I like it.”

You resume your meditation but at the back of your mind the phone is there. It’s quite at the back but somewhere it’s robbed you off the peace and enthusiasm you’d sat down with. You feel a bit restless but you’ve decided you are not getting up.

“Hey, did you check the features of iPhone 6s? It’s really cool,” the voice in your head says.

I’m meditating. I’m meditating. I’m meditating.

“You know no one can match Steve Jobs when it comes to innovation. You should at least see the new phone. You don’t have to buy it. And what about that hottie across the counter? She was definitely checking you out, buddy.”

Go away! I’m meditating…

But your enthusiasm is dying now like the flickering flame of a candle that’s at the end of its life. And the image of the hot girl has replaced your tranquil thoughts. For a moment you wonder if she was actually checking you out.

“Did you not notice the way she looked at you so many times?” the voice in your head continues. “Although, I think you could have worn a better shirt. I’ve

no idea why didn't you tell your wife that you didn't like the shirt when she got it for you. Why do you always give in when it comes to Monica? You weren't like that before."

God! How I hate confronting her. Why can't she dress like that girl? We've only been married two years and she looks like my mother.

Heck, she even sounds like my mother. My married life sucks…

"I tell you what, we'll worry about meditation later. Let's check out that phone. You might even see the same girl again… meditation can wait."

This is the story of most people when they try to meditate. The moment you answer back to your mind and begin communicating with it, the voice in the head wins.

The truth is that the mind is always talking. It is never silent. On the path of meditation the transformation of mind from a restless monkey to a docile cow happens in four stages. Experience of sustained and deep silence is not simply about feeling the bliss of quietude. It's much more than that.

One of the most amazing things you discover is a radical change in how you see the world around you – nothing provokes you any longer. This is one of the greatest rewards of right meditation – a state of no provocation. People, their statements, their responses, your own thoughts, reactions, emotions and desires – none of it will be able to provoke you.

You become spontaneous like a child but you never lose your mindfulness. It sounds paradoxical but only when you go through the four stages of mental quietude, you will know what I mean.

Imagine you live in a metropolitan city and you have taken a sabbatical to spend some time in peace in a far off location – in a small, quiet, countryside town close to a seashore. Your journey involves a long drive and your goal is to get away from the hustle-bustle of the city life to the peaceful seaside. That calm seaside is the ultimate stage of meditation – infinite, expansive, oceanic. However, before you settle in such state and beyond, you will invariably go through the following four stages:

Constant Activity – The Motorway

This is the first stage. Mind is always talking and most people remain unaware. When they want the mind to be quiet, like before sleeping or when they are depressed, and it does not shut up, that is when they realize how talkative mind is. There is constant activity going on in the mind. During this stage, when a

meditator sits down to meditate, his mind does not quieten beyond sporadic short periods lasting no more than a few seconds. All that the meditator hears is chatter. The more he tries to quiet the mind, the louder it becomes. Thoughts from everywhere continue their onslaught, discouraging the practitioner. At the end of their 30-minute long session, they get up more drained and tired. Some mistake it for relaxation but in reality it is no more than a short nap.

In a way, this is one of the most critical stages. Those who do not work with great vigilance in this stage, end up becoming average meditators. They may increase their meditation from thirty minutes to two hours but it will be no different. It will not yield greater results. Earlier they were doing 30 minutes of bad meditation and now they are doing two hours of it. That's the only difference. It is like having a bad cook. He may cook one dish or fifty, if his culinary skills aren't great, and he's doing nothing to improve his situation, he will continue to cook tasteless food. Something's got to change.

The first stage of mental stillness is like the traffic on a major highway. Traffic is always flowing in both directions. The meditator is on the highway of thoughts. When you are on a highway, you have no control over the traffic around you. There are multiple lanes, there will be cars in front, in the left lane, in the right lane, behind you. Some are going slower than you, many are going faster than you, others are at the same pace as you. There is traffic flowing in your direction and in the opposite direction. People are not honking so nothing abruptly disrupts your cruise mode or distracts you, but you are aware of the traffic around you and you know this is normal on the freeway. You have to drive carefully, you cannot afford any mistakes while changing lanes. A meditator in the first stage has no control on the flow of thoughts. They are on a motorway and it is the peak hour. The only thing you can do is drive with utmost caution and eventually you will get off the freeway.

Everyone, absolutely every single meditator goes through this stage. No matter if you are an introvert, extrovert, outspoken, the silent type, a believer, non-believer, a socialite or a saint, regardless of how well versed you are in the scriptures and yogic texts, if you are getting into the practice of meditation, you will go through this stage. The good news is if you persist, you will jump across it. Eventually the motorway will give way to the suburban road, the second stage of mental stillness.

Frequent Activity – Suburban Road

I have met hundreds of meditators. One on one. Most of them never cross the first stage. They never get off the motorway. The rush hour of thoughts and the restlessness of the mind stays constant in them. However, those who persist attentively and patiently, soon reach the second stage.

In this stage, the flow of thoughts is frequent but not constant. A meditator experiences easiness and many quiet stints lasting several moments where they get a glimpse of a mind free from thoughts – a no-mind state, a heightened state of consciousness. Your ability to meditate for longer period increases by a few minutes. If in stage one, you could meditate for 30 minutes, now you can meditate for 45 minutes. Most people are unable to maintain their concentration beyond a few seconds. While stage one is like the busy switchboard in a large corporate, where the receptionist barely finishes putting through one caller and the other one is already on the line, the second stage is more like the individual desk of a public relations person. He or she will be attending calls several times a day but it won't be as busy as the main switchboard.

In this stage, thoughts continue to knock on the doors of a meditator throughout their session. But with mindfulness and alertness, you develop greater immunity and awareness. You learn to decide when to let your thoughts into your headspace. It may sound strange but it works every time: when your thoughts know that you won't be opening the door for them, they stop knocking and leave you in peace.

Think of this stage as driving on a suburban road. The thoughts in your mind are no longer traveling in 16 lanes in both the directions. The speed has come down by half. There is still a degree of constancy to them, they haven't come to a halt yet nor have they disappeared. Your thoughts are travelling at a slower speed now. The traffic is more manageable. Your attentiveness increases noticeably as you get to this stage.

The unique aspect of this stage is its irreversibility.

It means once you attain mental quietude beyond the frequent activity of stage one and once you go past this stage, your meditation goes to an entirely new level and there is no going back. It is like milk has become butter now and no process can turn it back into milk. After you have crossed this stage, you will no longer have to deal with an onslaught of thoughts regardless of when you sit down to meditate.

Occasional Activity – The Countryside Road

On your journey so far, you've come off the freeway and you have driven through a suburban road. Now, you've hit the countryside road, the third stage of mental stillness.

Just like effusive rivers rush into the sea but the sea remains unmoved, the mind of a yogi remains unaffected by the rise and fall of thoughts and emotions. Sea is not always calm, it has tides and it can get tempestuous, but such choppiness is not an everyday affair. A meditator in the third stage can have rough periods but they are far and few in between.

From my experience, less than half a percent of meditators get to the third stage of mental stillness. This is not because they are not earnest about it but because wrong meditation does not lead to improvement. When a meditator has gone past the first two stages, they develop an unfailing stillness of mind that reflects through their actions, thoughts and speech. The energy of a stage three meditator has a quieting effect on those around him.

The third stage is the countryside road. You can drive for several miles before you come across any other vehicle. Green fields, meadows, pastures, pristine air, blue sky, expansive views, beautiful landscapes, quiet surroundings, no rush – ah, the pleasure of countryside driving! You can go slower or a bit faster, you choose your own pace. The conditions permit you to do that. A meditator who has reached stage three learns to harness and channelize his thoughts. Most of their sessions comprise spans of quiescence and bliss with occasional thoughts emerging here and there, on and off. They don't get up all relaxed from their meditation, for relaxed they already are, otherwise it would not have been possible to get to this stage. Instead, they get up feeling supercharged, refreshed and alert. A great meditator is always alert. Alertness is not only the reward but an essential ingredient for good meditation. A stage three meditator can easily sit unmoving for three hours.

No Activity – No Thorough Fare

Even though I have called it a stage, there is really no going beyond this stage. Intellectually, we may define an infinite number of stages. In all practicality though, stage four is the outcome of crossing the three stages successfully. It comes with great, persistent, prolonged, intelligent, alert, intense and correct practice. Please carefully note all the seven adjectives in the previous sentence. You miss on any of these and there is no hope. A stage four meditator can sit unmoving, like a rock, for as long as he wants.

At this stage you experience extraordinary absorption and understand the reality of things unknown and inconceivable by the ordinary mind. Buddha said, “The one who knows the reality of one thing knows the reality of everything.”

The fourth stage is enlightenment.

On your long drive to self-realization, think of this stage as a private property, a large villa, an exclusive chateau. It has a path, a road but it is no thoroughfare – a large gate and a high fence block noise, traffic, people and any unwanted visitors. You have your own garden, comfort and peace. Any visitor will either have taken prior appointment which means you are aware of their arrival beforehand or you will have the choice to let them in or not. A stage four meditator is an adept, a siddha. He can stay on a thought for as long as he so chooses. The awareness is so crystallized that he can decide which thought he wants to entertain and which one he wishes to let go. There are no surprises.

The energy of a stage four meditator has a calming effect on everyone who comes in contact, even if briefly. You develop a natural stillness of the gaze.

Having said that, meditation is not salt. Just rigorous practice of meditation is not a substitute of the virtues a meditator must cultivate. It is not possible to reach the fourth stage without developing a selfless concern for the greater good. A degree of selflessness is paramount to rise above petty emotions. A sense of ego and selfishness is generally the seed behind all undesirable feelings.

Negative emotions adversely affect the quality of your practice. They pull you back. As you progress and reach this stage a sense of dispassion arises naturally. You enjoy everything people around you do but you no longer cling onto anything or anyone – negative or positive. A meditator at this stage has fully realized the truth that everything springs from a thought and if they can drop the thought at the moment of its emergence, no undesirable emotion or action will manifest.

Frankly, if you are still reading this book then you have a very high chance of discovering yourself through the path of meditation. I congratulate you in all honesty. To me it means that meditation to you is not merely a self-help method but something more. If you have made it this far, you are now ready to understand the intricacies of meditation beginning with the six primary principles of meditation. Let’s get on with it.

sanaih sanair uparamed buddhya dhrti-grhitaya,
atma-samstham manah kritva na kincid api cintayet.[17]

Gradually, with steady and determined practice, the yogi learns to establish himself in supreme bliss reining in his senses and flickering mind. He learns to insulate himself from all distractions and remain focused.

Six Principles of Meditation

Two good friends, Ron and John, were sitting in a restaurant waiting for their order to be served. A few tables across, a girl came and took her seat.

Some five minutes later, Ron said to John, “I think that girl really likes me.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, she’s been looking at me for the past five minutes and smiling constantly.”

John burst out laughing and clapped. “That’s nothing, man,” he said. “The first time I saw you, I kept laughing for an hour!”

I’ve carefully chosen this joke because it covers the six primary principles of meditation.

Some 1000 years ago in India, there lived a great meditator Tilopada, or Tilopa as referred in numerous Tibetan texts. Tilopa was born in a royal family in Bengal. Much like the Buddha, the Gautama, he too renounced his kingdom and went on to crystallize the essence of meditation for serious practitioners. His teachers were a range of illustrious Buddhist scholars, most notably Nagarjuna. Tilopa called his system of meditation Mahamudra – the royal seal or the wisdom of emptiness. He orally transmitted this system of meditation to his chief disciple and successor Naropad, more commonly known as Naropa, another phenomenal Indian scholar. After Naropa had mastered Mahamudra, Tilopa gave him six golden prohibitions – a summary of the entire system in six words.

The original Sanskrit instruction is no longer extant, but translated in English, his advice is short and worth its weight in gold.

Before I spell out the six principles, I would like to share with you a little story that underpins the golden rule of meditation.

A deeply unhappy but rich woman, used to the superstitious ways of living, approached a mystic once. She went with a long list of petty problems and complaints. It’s far easy to cure a disease or treat a patient than cure someone who is actually healthy and of sound mind. The woman was miserable in spite of

all the worldly comforts that life had provided to her. She was fit as a bull, had a loving family, hefty savings and a beautiful home. The mystic cast a glance at her troubled round face and thought there truly was nothing he could give the woman, there was certainly no panacea. And yet, there she was seeped in pain sitting by the mystic's feet hoping for a solution.

After a long pause, he said to the lady, "I will give you an ancient talisman. This will solve all your problems."

He pulled out an old rusty copper coin with a hole in it and asked her to bury it near the roots of a banyan tree on the night of the full moon. "But, for the talisman to work," he warned, "there is a condition that must be fulfilled. When you bury the ancient coin, you must not think of any white elephant with three legs, a lame monkey or a talking frog. If you imagine any of these even for a moment, the remedy will fail."

The woman offered sweets, gold and clothes to the mystic and left happily. The full moon night was ten days away and she reminded herself everyday to not to think about the three legged elephant, lame monkey or the talking frog. Not a moment went by when she didn't remember the mystic's last words. For the remedy to work she had to stay away from thinking about these three, she thought. On the night of the full moon, when she went to bury the coin, only three things sprung to her mind: a white elephant, a lame monkey and a talking frog. The very thoughts she had worked hard to avoid.

The golden rule of meditation is: you cannot *not* think about something by thinking about it.

It's impossible to avoid thinking about anything by telling yourself that you are not going to think about it. If you follow the golden rule of meditation, following the below mentioned six principles will become much easier.

No Recollection: Don't Pursue Thoughts of the Past

Your mind will repeatedly draw thoughts of the past from its vast store of memory. Don't pursue those thoughts. Simply drop them and gently draw your attention back to the present moment. If you do so mindfully, thoughts of the past will not interfere with your meditation.

No Calculation: Don't Pursue Thoughts of the Present

When you refuse to disturb your attention and let go of any thoughts of the past,

your mind will shift to thoughts of the present situation. You will think about where you are sitting, your surroundings, temperature of the room, fragrance of the incense and so on. Once again, pay no heed and draw your attention to the object of your focus.

No Imagination: Don’t Imagine What May Happen in the Future

When you drop thoughts of the past and present with determination and alertness, your mind will conjure up all these images. You may start to think about the future or dream your life a certain way. If you remember that thoughts are empty in their own right, you’ll find it relatively easier to drop the thought. Otherwise, you’ll find yourself daydreaming while meditating. As soon as you find yourself thinking about the future, drop the thought and get back to the present moment.

No Examination: Don’t Analyze Your Thoughts

No matter what type of thought it is, don’t get into analysis. For example, a thought of you getting hurt or abandoned in love might arise. If you start analyzing why it happened to you or where did you go wrong or why did your partner do this and so on, before you know, it your concentration will be lost. While meditating no thought must ever be examined, unless you are doing contemplative meditation, in which case you train your mind to contemplate on a singular thought. For now, just be mindful that any examination or analysis will have an adverse effect on the quality of your meditation.

No Construction: Don’t Try to Create an Experience

Sometimes with persistent meditation, you experience beautiful sounds, fragrances, hues or even glimpses into different states of consciousness. One of the most common mistake meditators make is to crave for the same experience again. This deviates you from the path. If you find yourself longing for a certain experience or waiting for it, gently draw your attention to the present moment. Remind yourself that any desire for an experience is no more than a thought. And thought must be dropped at all costs.

No Digression: Don’t Wander; Simply Stay in the Present Moment

It is common to feel different emotions during your meditation. You laugh, you cry, sometimes you feel sad and elated at other times. While a beginner meditator can’t plug his emotions right away, it’s absolutely critical not to examine your emotions or try to find their cause (you can do that after your meditation if you like but not during the session). When you find yourself digressing from your meditation, gently draw your attention to the present moment. You could listen to your breath.

The greater effort you put in following the instructions above, the more you’ll gain from meditation. If you sit down to meditate and start to analyze or pursue your thoughts, you will not progress in gaining mental stability and calmness. The four primary hurdles of meditation continue to bother such a meditator.

In the joke that I used at the beginning of this chapter, Ron got distracted, engaged in recollection of the past, analysis of the present, examined what it meant, imagined a certain future and craved for an experience – all that out of nothing! Next time you are meditating and you want to recall the six principles, just think of this joke.

In a nutshell: while meditating, don’t brood over, don’t resent and don’t repent your past. Don’t examine what’s going on in your present life. Don’t imagine any future. Don’t analyze any thought. When a thought comes, don’t run after it. It’ll disappear. It’ll wither away on its own. Don’t crave for any specific experience or else you’ll end up mentally constructing that experience, thereby jeopardizing your meditation. Don’t let your mind wander. Simply maintain your awareness with alertness. Just be here now, in the present moment and you’ll see the beauty of meditation soon enough. Let me show you how to meditate now.

Elements of Good Meditation

- ✧ Attention
- ✧ Posture
- ✧ Concentration
- ✧ Mindfulness
- ✧ Alertness

yatoyatoniścalatimanaścañcalamasthiram,
tatastatoniyamyaitadātmanyevavaśaṁ nayet.[18]

Whenever your mind wanders off, you simply and gently bring it back to the present moment. This is how mind is tamed.

Attention

Once upon a time, a man was taking a stroll in the market. He came across a jewellery shop and saw a gold ornament on display. He picked up a rock lying nearby and broke the glass with a powerful blow. Before anyone could realize, he was scurrying away with the jewel. But the security guards nabbed him in no time and he was presented before the magistrate.

“I’m surprised,” the judge said. “You attempted burglary in broad daylight, in the middle of a busy bazaar. What were you thinking?”

“It was the gold, Your Honor,” the thief said. “I couldn’t resist it. I got so blinded that I couldn’t see anything else. I didn’t see the guards or the owner, I didn’t see other people around either. All I saw was the gold.”

All I saw was the gold: it’s all about attention, more specifically, it’s about the art of attention. Before you feel anything, your mind thinks about it. It takes you back to the old memory, the person, the incident and a chain reaction kicks in. The mind is then bombarded with more memories of the same nature and before you know it, those thoughts have added up and they have brought about a complete change in the mood. You were fine a few moments ago but now your day is ruined because the thoughts have turned into feelings and the feelings have completely overpowered you. It happens in a fraction of a second but it’s enough to throw anyone off balance, for the power of a thought is as great as its speed.

If I’ve to sum up the act of meditation in a single phrase I would say ‘presence of mind’. That’s where meditation is different from sleep or other forms of relaxing activities. While you experience a suspension of consciousness in sleep, it’s the exact opposite in meditation – a razor sharp consciousness.

The moment you lose your presence of mind, you are most likely going to have an accident. A head-on collision with your thoughts. If you aren’t attentive, you’ll start listening to the blabbering of your mind and end up drinking when you shouldn’t be.

The ability to direct your attention and keep it yoked to the object of

meditation is fundamental to good meditation. This is the singular most important instruction, the only way to keep your mind in the present moment. Think of a concert pianist playing a difficult piece, let's say Chopin Étude Op. 10 No. 4. Her fingers move on the piano as if they are doing an effortless dance. The pianist seems to be enjoying playing this difficult piece. To reach this level of proficiency, however, she must have put in more than ten thousand hours of practice.

Learning how to meditate and channelize your attention is no different to learning how to play any musical instrument or sport. It's easier to direct our attention when the activity is enjoyable, interesting or engaging. Meditation, in the beginning, is neither of these. It's difficult and tiring and the word 'boring' may come to mind too. But only in the beginning. Your attention shifts from one thought to another. The more you try to tie it down, the louder it retaliates. Fortunately, there is a way to keep your attention alive and channelized.

No matter how short or long your session of meditation, your attention is going to experience nine different states. Yogic scriptures call it *navaakaaraacittasthiti*, literally for the nine forms of the mental state. Having spent years practicing meditation, I can tell you with utmost conviction that all great meditators, from absolute beginners to the finest of yogis, go through these stages. No one is born with the skill to meditate. It's learnt like any other art.

Master Vasubandhu gives nine critical instructions on the art of settling your mind so that you may meditate. In his commentary on *Sutraalankara*, he says:

1. Stabilize the mind
2. Settle it completely
3. Settle it firmly
4. Settle it intensely
5. Clear it of obstacles
6. Pacify your mind
7. Completely pacify it
8. Channel the mind into one stream
9. Settle the mind in equipoise

Once you reach the ninth stage, you are ready to meditate. It seems hard work, it perhaps it is too. But if you are serious about meditation, eventually it will become effortless to you. Following the aforesaid nine instructions pushes your attention into a different state. Each state is progressively better than the

preceding one. During the days of my intense practice, I used to remind myself of these instructions at least twice in a span of 24 hours.

A disciple once asked his guru, “Why do we pray after completing our meditation?”

“We do it to thank God that it’s over,” the guru quipped.

On days, meditation truly feels like a boring and difficult activity. I remember feeling extremely tired and exhausted from intense meditation lasting 18 hours a day, sometimes 22, and doing it like a madman day in and day out for hundreds of days. But, you need that kind of madness to succeed at anything. It’s that madness that gets you results.

If you remind yourself of the nine instructions on building, directing and harmonizing your attention, your mental state will go through a transformation in nine stages. It’s important to understand that you’ll experience these nine stages in every session of meditation. They are not post-meditative states. Instead, you’ll experience them every time you sit down and meditate. In the beginning, you may never experience the ninth or even the fourth state for any more than a few seconds. If you do, then probably you had dozed off. As you progress on the path, however, you will slip into the ninth stage of your attention within the first ten minutes, if not earlier. The rest of your session will be good meditation. Here are the nine states or stages of attention. For now, I’m giving a brief account on the instructions on attention. In the subsequent sections, you’ll learn how to put these instructions into practice for flawless meditation.

Positioning of Attention

Scriptures call it *cittasthaapana*. It also means placement of the mind. This is the first stage in the life of a meditator. At this stage, the mind constantly wanders off and doesn’t stay on a thought for any more than a few seconds. Meditation feels more like a battle with the mind at this stage. Basically, a meditator’s attempt to channelize his thoughts only results in more restlessness at this stage. This is the beginning of your meditation. You sit down with an alert mind and position your attention at your object of meditation (which could be breath, sound, form or void, but more on that in later sections). This stage corresponds to the first instruction: stabilizing your mind.

Intermittent Attention

This stage is called *samsthaapana* and it also means comforting or encouraging

attention. The meditator experiences short periods (lasting a few seconds) of good attention during the meditation.

These are the times when the mind is not wandering off. After a mental quietude of a few seconds, thoughts come knocking again, but often the meditator remains unaware for several minutes of the stray thoughts. He ‘forgets’ that he is meditating.

For most part, you’ll discover that your mind wanders off. Every time it does, bring your attention back with the second instruction: settling your mind completely. You had stabilized your mind in the first stage and now you are focused on settling it.

Constant Attention

This stage is called *avasthaapana*, which, interestingly, also means to expose. What happens when your body is exposed to heat or cold – you feel it more, right? Similarly, when you expose your mind during meditation, you become more aware and alert.

Mindfulness is exposing your mind. The primary difference between this and the earlier stage is the degree of alertness. In this stage, the meditator keeps his vigil on-guard and becomes aware as soon as the mind is distracted.

To strengthen your attention and improve its quality, follow the fourth instruction: settling your mind intensely

Fixed Attention

It’s called *upasthaapana*. Literally, it means to be ready, and that’s what this stage is all about: getting ready for the real meditation. In this stage, the aspirant is mostly able to hold his attention during the session but is still bothered by periods of restlessness and dullness.

If you follow the first four instructions properly, then by this stage your mind will start to retaliate a bit. It doesn’t want to be restricted. It wants to go its own way. At this stage, if you follow the fifth instruction, you’ll experience fixed attention, and the fifth instruction, as I said earlier is – clearing your mind of obstacles. There are going to be certain obstacles like restlessness, torpor, etc. If you gently draw your attention back to the present moment, you are well on your way to the next stage.

Lucid Attention

The meditator is able to experience deep tranquillity of the mind.

This stage is called *damana* in Sanskrit, which means tamed or passionless. The attention of the meditator is tamed at this stage. I must mention a common misconception that many meditators have: when you feel peaceful in meditation, it is not the same as taming the mind. Sometimes it's purely because you've lost the lucidity, the sharpness of your attention.

While you are getting your attention ready after stabilizing it, positioning it, settling it and clearing its path, you start to feel a little restless, quite restless actually. You can't afford to interrupt your session by talking to yourself or holding a communion with your mind. Instead, you must carry on with the sixth instruction that is pacifying your mind. (The later sections of this book will cover in detail how to pacify one's mind.)

Pacification of the Mind

This stage is called *shamana* and it means extinguished. By this stage, thoughts extinguish in the mind of this meditator, and, the mind is clear of most mental obstacles. However, this mental exertion sometimes gives birth to subtle feelings of restlessness or excitement. It is predominantly so because at this stage, you've done what mind is not used to at all – to be quiet, to be still. Only the sincere and dedicated practitioners reach this stage.

Complete Pacification of the Mind

It's called *vyupashamana*. Most interestingly, the term *vyupa* means the one who eats out of his own hands. This is one of the finest stages of meditation. In this state, the mind is looking at itself sharply. It's able to recognize dullness, restlessness, thoughts, emotions and all the other distractions. It is completely pacified and is not afraid to remain established in tranquility.

If you have followed the first six instructions correctly, you'll most definitely experience this state. As your mind remains attentive but pacified up to this point, there's still a great chance that it may become restless. It's like a toddler abruptly waking up to a nightmare in the middle of the night. Or a sudden twitch of the body wakes you just when you were about to fall asleep. It's like how you put a baby to sleep. Even after she's gone to sleep, you must continue singing the lullaby or patting for a little while longer to completely put her to sleep.

At any sign of loss of attention due to your mind rebelling, focus on the seventh instruction: completely pacify it.

Intense Attention

The mind attains single-pointed concentration at this stage. It's called *ekotikarana*. The meditator can carry out an uninterrupted session of lucid meditation lasting nearly two hours in the steadiest posture. There is practically no dullness or restlessness. At this stage, follow the eight instruction: channel the mind into one stream. Your attention will now flow like a gentle

Himalayan stream – beautiful, serene, tranquil.

Profound Absorption

It's called *samaadhaana* and it means perfect tranquil equipoise.

The meditator meditates effortlessly and can remain in tranquil equipoise for an average of four hours at a stretch, including maintaining the posture. And let me tell you four hours of tranquillity can keep you calm for days at end without the slightest ripple of mental disturbance. In the context of meditation, however, the ninth state of attention prepares you to slip into an insightful and blissful session of meditation.

This stage corresponds to the ninth instruction: settle the mind in equipoise. With a mind that's settled in equipoise, you are ready to either take deep dives in the ocean of bliss or perform penetrating analysis with discerning wisdom and unearthing a wealth of knowledge and insight for the welfare of those around you.

Once you are ready to meditate, you need to know what makes meditation effective, rewarding and transcendental, notably, the four elements of meditation.

samaṁ kāya-śiro-grīvaṁdhārayann acalaṁ sthiraḥ,
samprekṣya nāsikāgraṁ svaṁdiśaś cānavalokayan.[19]

The yogi should sit erect with head torso and neck in a straight line. He should build his concentration and settle his gaze at the tip of his nose. With mindfulness he should direct his attention only at the object of focus.

Posture

Posture in meditation has a direct impact on channelizing vital energies in your body. The ten vital energies are detailed in the appendix to this book. Before I elucidate the eight key elements of a good posture, I would like to draw your attention to Patanjali, one of the greatest meditators to walk on our planet in the last five thousand years. In his aphorisms, he places great emphasis on the quality of posture. He uses the term *asana siddhi,* perfection of the posture.

According to Patanjali, it is only after perfecting one's posture that one advances on the path of yoga. Breath regulation (*pranayama*), withdrawal of senses (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*) and realization (*samadhi*) are only possible for a meditator if he is able to perfect his posture. I concur with this view. Perfecting your posture is a great challenge and majority of the meditators quit at the rigors it poses. By perfecting I mean to reach a state where you can sit unmoving in one posture for as long as you want without experiencing pain or numbness in your body. Your body is bound to experience a certain tiredness but without the aches.

On the question of what posture one should sit in, Patanjali states *sthiram sukham asanam*. It means any posture you are comfortable with. This does not mean that you can completely ignore the basics of posture. Whether a student writes with a fountain pen or a ball-point pen, they may be left-handed or right-handed, the teacher may have no problems provided what they scribble is legible. So, any posture you choose is okay as long as you respect the eight elements of a good posture. They are absolutely critical for the serious practitioner.

Mastering correct posture is one of the most difficult aspects of meditation. Once again, if we are talking about meditating for a few minutes to feel good, posture perhaps wouldn't even matter. You could lie down, curl up, sit on a tree, float on a river, hang upside down and be meditating. But, when you look upon meditation to lead you into a state of extraordinary bliss and supreme union, there's absolutely no shortcut. You will have to champion the correct posture. You may be a Mozart or a Beethoven, if you want to produce good music, you

have to spend time at the piano.

I remember a time in the Himalayas when I thought I would never be able to walk normally again. My knees used to hurt so bad that I couldn't even move a step without the support of a stick. This was the result of prolonged meditation where I would sit still for a minimum of ten hours to a maximum of twenty-two hours at one go. It was the most difficult thing I'd ever done in my life, but I persisted. With that excruciating pain in my knees I sat down for meditation each day. A few months later, those aches and pains first subsided and then went away completely. I began to enjoy sessions of deep meditation because my body was no longer an impediment.

In the earlier stages, you experience aches and pains in different parts of your body. You can overcome some of those by doing yoga or stretching regularly, but for the most part, the only way to get past this hurdle is by persisting with your meditation. I reiterate, body pain is not an issue for an amateur meditator because such a meditator ends his or her session whenever they encounter a hurdle. It is only an issue when you tread the path of meditation with seriousness and dedication, continuing to build the intensity of your practice.

Correct posture is about perfect stillness of the body. Think of an archer, a chess player, a mathematician, a scientist; how still they are when they are busy in their respective vocations. Stillness of the body fuels stillness of the mind and in turn stillness of the mind helps you be more still physically. They complement each other. When you progress on the path of meditation, ultimately, there should come a point when you are able to rise above the body consciousness. Then alone, you'll truly feel that this body is an instrument, it is supposed to serve you and not the other way round. Perfection of the posture is essential for a serious meditator. It's the *prana* of meditation.

This does not mean you have to sit still for several hours and bear the tremendous pain like I did (unless you want to walk the extraordinary path of meditation). But whenever you do sit down to meditate, it could be just for fifteen minutes, make it a point to sit like a rock, like dead wood. This will allow the energies in your body to be still. Calmness will start to envelope you automatically. The act of meditation will become more joyous and the rewards will come quicker. I cannot overstate the importance of correct posture. I could not stress it enough.

An important point to remember is that your ability to sit still, the duration of staying in one posture increases gradually. If today you can sit still for 20 minutes, it may take you one year worth of sincere practice to reach 40 minutes.

Most meditators, with effort and determination, can sit still for 45 minutes. The most difficult stretch to overcome is 45 minutes to 90 minutes.

This may take another year.

Once you are able to sit still for 90 minutes and meditate without aches and pain, you will jump in ten minute increments. Your ability to hold your meditative posture will increase to 100 minutes, 110 minutes, 120 minutes and so on. The next major hurdle will come at three hours. From a still posture of three hours to perfecting it so you may sit still for four hours at a stretch, unmoving, can easily take another one year. Reaching the six-hour limit from four hours, is relatively easier.

But let me tell you, the day you master four hours of stillness, you will be no less than a living Buddha, a siddha in flesh and bones. Anyone who can sit still for that long with full awareness becomes a fountain of super-knowledge. Your thoughts gain so much power that whatever you sincerely desire starts to manifest in your life without a doubt. The more concentrated a thought, the more powerful it is. Even if you don't meditate but just learn to sit still, you will gain much from it.

There are many forms of meditation and some of them don't even require the meditator to be sitting, let alone sitting in a posture. I'll touch upon them briefly. For now, the meditation we are covering is seated meditation. It requires that you to sit still with mindfulness. In order to do so, there are eight key elements of a good posture:

Cross Legged

There are many ways of sitting cross-legged. You can choose any way that you are comfortable with. Sitting cross legged is important because it helps you control the *apana vayu*, descending energy. If you have a specific medical condition that prohibits you from sitting cross legged on the floor, you can do the next best thing: sit in a chair. At any rate, at least cross your feet and not sit with your feet apart. Joining of the hands and feet is important to allow a complete circulation and flow of energy within you.

Straight Back

Once you learn to meditate with a straight back, you become qualified to do many advanced yogic practices. If you are serious about progressing on the path, a straight back is a non-negotiable requirement then. A straight back helps in

channelization of *prana* and *samana vayu*, or vital life force and thermal energy respectively. Thermal energy further acts as the bridge to allow fusion of vital life force and descending energy. From that fusion begins the arousal of the primordial energy, more famously known as kundalini or the serpent power.

Relaxed Arms

Do not stretch your arms. The natural shape of your elbows is slightly bent, so keep it like that. Keep them relaxed. The posture of keeping your arms stretched and straight, where your wrists touch your knees, is not a practical posture for intense meditation. If you keep your arms perfectly straight, soon they'll get tired and cause distraction.

Joined Hands

Your hands can cross each other or they can be one on top of another. Putting your left hand on top of the right keeps your body warmer, influences the right brain and fuels your feminine aspect. Resting your right hand on top keeps your body cooler, affects your left brain and boosts your masculine energy.

These differences are quite subtle but as you progress, you will notice even the subtlest of changes caused by the minutest of modifications in your posture. Ideally, your thumbs should join each other at the tips.

Straight Head

Your neck and head should be in straight line. It facilitates channelization of the *udana vayu*, ascending energy. When the primal energy travels upwards through the central channel, it needs a straight line; think of laser beams. Neckandhead, therefore should be straight. Further, it facilitates easier movement of the *vayana vayu*, diffusive energy from neck upwards. A subtle but critical point to be noted here is that your neck must not be stretched. Your neck has a normal minor hook that should be maintained. Basically all parts of your body should be relaxed and in normal position; still, but relaxed.

Still Gaze

This is the unfailing sign of a true yogi. With practice and experience, you will find your gaze becoming increasingly still. A still gaze channelizes the five secondary energies. Any hurdles from hiccups, sneezing, burping are removed

by perfecting your gaze. Still gaze aids superior concentration which in turn helps the free flow of energy in your body, and when energy starts to flow freely, pain and numbness begin to disappear. Restraining movement of the eyeballs is one of the last hurdles in perfecting a still posture.

Gentle Smile

This may seem insignificant but it’s an important factor in acquiring overall stillness of the body and mind. Once you are firmly seated, keep your body firm but relaxed. Relax your facial muscles and just smile gently. A subtle breeze of calmness starts to flow when you smile gently. You can try it right now; just relax your face, lower your gaze keeping your eyes half-closed and smile. The frown, the tension will disappear immediately.

Position of Tongue and Teeth

Your tongue should touch the front part of your palate. It is particularly important because formation of saliva can interfere with your perfect stillness. If your tongue touches the palate, any saliva keeps moving down on its own. Otherwise, you’ll find yourself swallowing every now and then. The act of swallowing raises body consciousness. Teeth should be slightly parted and lips just joined – no clenching of teeth, no pouting of lips, just a normal, natural body posture.

Your posture should be firm but not tense. It should be steady and comfortable. You should neither be stiff as a robot nor pliable as a child’s plastic doll. And, please don’t forget to smile gently while you meditate; there’s enough sadness in the world as it is. Meditation may be hard but it’s not sad. When you sit down to meditate you exude a certain energy, a good posture with all the above mentioned eight elements greatly helps in the free flow of that energy. With your legs crossed, hands joined, still gaze and straight back, channelization and retention of the energy occurs most naturally.

With a comfortable posture and natural stillness, it becomes much easier to build the concentration required for great meditation.

tatraēkāgraṁ mana kṛtvāyatacittēndriyakriya:
upaviśyāsanēyuñjyādyōgamātmaviśud'dhayē.[20]

The adept, seated firmly in one posture, restraining his senses and mind, with supreme one-pointed concentration, should engage himself in the practice of yoga.

Concentration

Three monks were meditating together by the riverside. Two of them were senior and considered themselves to be more advanced than the third monk, who actually had remained doubtful of their claim. Their monastery was on the other side of the river.

“It’s normal to have supernatural powers when you are enlightened,” one of them said. He got up walked on water, across the river, and came back walking on the water. “I’d just gone to bring my shawl.”

The second monk showed no reaction but the junior one sat agape. Before he could get over the miracle, he had just witnessed, the second senior monk also got up and performed the same feat. “I’d forgotten my alms-bowl back there,” he said in a matter of fact tone while sitting down.

Now, the junior monk was almost shell-shocked. He realized it was their confidence and conviction that they could walk on water. Not to be outdone, and to test his powers, he too got up with the intention to walk on water. Two steps from the bank and he fell down in the river, his robe soaked in water. The senior monks laughed hysterically. Still not giving up, he came out and tried to run across the river. He fell down again.

“Do you think we should tell him,” the first monk said to the other, “where the stones are?”

Building your concentration, the *most important* aspect of a good meditation, is like walking on water. But once you know where the stones are, it becomes a lot easier to do so. Concentration is focus with precision–one careful step at a time, one moment at a time. The only way to retain your concentration is by retaining it in this moment, the present moment, and then the next moment, and the next, and the next and so on. If you maintain the sharpness of your concentration from one moment to the next, you stand to gain extraordinary rewards from meditation.

In our current world where you have millions of websites and mobile apps, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter and other distractions, achieving

concentration is more difficult than it has ever been in the history of our race. Yet, if you wish to meditate, you have to go back to the basics, to an ancient lifestyle – frugal and simple. This lifestyle is not to be followed necessarily at all times (good if you do that though) but certainly while you meditate.

Becoming a good meditator requires great concentration and to become a great meditator requires supreme concentration. Concentration, especially one pointed concentration, comes with practice. Quality of practice leads to abundance of results. Please note the term 'one pointed concentration'. This is the primary form of concentration we are concerned with. Before I go on to share the five types of concentration in an exposition never done before, allow me to share a famous story from the great epic *Mahabharata*. I must point out that this knowledge is neither documented in Buddhist texts nor in the great Patanjali's *YogaSutras*. It's the result of my carefully distilled practise of over twenty years.

Arjuna, the great warrior-archer, his brothers, his cousins – all from the royal family – and many others were taught by the incomparable archer-guru Dronacarya. Guru Drona spent years training them. One day he decided to test them. He hung a bird, carved out of wood, on a high branch of a distant tree and gathered all his students. They were asked to stand in a line. The task was to hit the bird's eye.

Drona called the first student near him. The trainee got in position and was ready to hit but he was interrupted by Drona, who asked him, "What do you see?"

"I see trees," replied the student.

Drona asked him to step aside rather than shoot.

He repeated the exercise with each one of his disciples. Everyone gave a different answer. Some said they saw leaves, others said they could see birds, some others saw trees and so forth. He didn't allow anyone to shoot.

When it was Arjuna's turn, he was asked the same question.

Arjuna replied, "I am only seeing the bird's eye."

Drona gave him the permission to shoot and Arjuna hit right on the mark.

"If you are seeing other than what you should," Drona said, "you are not concentrating hard enough."

One pointed concentration cuts through the complicated mesh of intertwined thoughts like shafts of water cut through stone. No matter how warm a day, the sunlight outside does not melt plastic or set your newspaper on fire. Pass the

same sunlight through a lens and it turns into a beam. The beam, made from nothing else but pure sunlight, can create fire in a matter of seconds. Concentration is the beam of your mental energy. The power that isn't available to a million intelligent thoughts is easily accessible to a single concentrated thought.

Not all concentration is the same though. After sunlight passing through a convex lens will form a focused beam whereas the same sunlight when passed through a concave lens will scatter completely. The same goes for concentration as well. With what form of concentration you process a thought will eventually determine what it does to your mind. With this slight digression, let me now explain the five types of concentration.

One-pointed Concentration

One-pointed or single-minded concentration is the most important ingredient in attaining the tranquillity of mind through meditation. In fact, it is your road to the pinnacle of meditation. Imagine throwing a rock in a river; there may be ripples, there may be fishes, but the rock goes pointedly towards the bottom.

Think of an arrow from the archer's bow, it goes straight. There are no diversions. This is one pointed concentration. It is the art of staying on the object of meditation with focus and lucidity.

Maintaining one-pointed concentration is a tiring act. It starts to get exhausting after the first thirty minutes. During the intermediate stages of meditation, my mind used to go numb after the first three hours. I would think that there was no way I could go on maintaining the crispness of my concentration, but I knew I had to persist. Thus, I used to practise mental relaxation for a few minutes and then get back to my intense meditation, which was basically to maintain the lucidity of my concentration with alertness and mindfulness.

Merely staring at an object is not pointed concentration. When it comes to meditation, it is how focused your mind is on the object of your meditation that determines how good your concentration is. For example, close your eyes and visualize your favourite image, any image at all. Try to keep the image in the frame of your visualization. At the beginning, you will find that the image is sharp and clear but after a few seconds it either fades or disappears altogether. Bring the image back in the sight of your inner eyes. It will fade again. Visualize it again. Each time the image fades or disappears, your concentration gets

disrupted.

So, when I say one-pointed concentration, I mean to refer to your ability to hold onto a thought or visualization (I'll cover it in greater detail in the chapter on Concentrative Meditation). In line with the six principles of meditation, you don't have to examine the thought or the focus object. You simply have to retain it in front of you. The same principle applies even when you are just watching your breath. You need to concentrate on the inhalation and exhalation.

It takes great practice and in building this concentration you go through the four stages of mental stillness that I've elucidated earlier in this book. As you progress, you are able to hold on to the image for longer durations. One pointed concentration is a definitive way of exponentially increasing the power of your thought. Once you train yourself to concentrate on a thought, your thoughts start to manifest in your life.

Absorptive Concentration

Absorptive concentration, as the name says, is when you are deeply absorbed in doing something. You are in a kind of flow. It's a beautiful form of concentration. It happens due to your interest in the matter at hand and not because you are trying very hard to concentrate. Think of an artist, a painter who is standing in front of the canvas unaware of the world around her. She is deeply absorbed in her area of interest, in painting. This type of concentration channelizes your energies, brings together your thoughts and composes your mind to produce a creative output.

The more you practice this concentration, the more creative you get. An artist's skills continue to improve as she continues to paint. Painting is merely an example. You could be absorbed in composing music, writing a song or a book and so forth. One of the unique rewards of this concentration is the sense of independence that you attain. The more absorbed you are, the less you need the world around you. It brings a certain calmness in you.

If you build one-pointed concentration, the quality of your absorptive concentration improves automatically and significantly. Meditation can unlock your creativity in unimaginable ways.

Analytical Concentration

You can also think of it as an investigative or contemplative concentration. Your brain is constantly calculating and analysing in this form of concentration.

Think of a chess player. A chess player can look at the chess board unblinking for very long periods. He is concentrating but it's not one-pointed concentration. He is constantly evaluating their line of attack, variations, moves and the opponent's responses.

He is so absorbed in that analytical investigation that the world around him ceases to exist. Neither hunger, thirst nor nature's call – nothing disturbs him when they are calculating. If you play chess or if you ever had the opportunity to observe a chess player closely, you will know what I mean.

The ability to carry out penetrating analysis on any given line of thought results from analytical concentration. A computer programmer engrossed in fixing a bug or creating a new piece of software, or a mathematician working on a theorem – they are masters of analytical concentration. Some of the all-time greatest scientists and inventors were extremely skilled in this type of concentration.

Like the other forms of concentration, the more you practice it, the better you get at it. It continues to sharpen. Over time, you are able to carry out even more detailed analysis quicker. That is not just because of experience in your field but also because your mind can cut through the noise and stay focussed in the analysis. The speed and depth at which a trained human mind can analyse is simply mind-boggling – a point that was proved by Gary Kasparov's win against IBM's supercomputer Deep Blue in 1995. On the one hand was Deep Blue, more than six feet high and three feet wide, a powerful machine capable of evaluating 200 million positions per second. On the other hand was a human being with brain the size of a lettuce and yet having superior analytical concentration and intelligence.

Elementary Concentration

This is not even real concentration, it is more like pseudo concentration but it's what most of us utilize for the most part of our lives, especially in this day and age. With this form of concentration, the mind does not become sharper, quieter or even happier. Above all, our mind gains nothing new when practicing elementary concentration. It only helps in engaging the mind so that we get a break from the thinking machine our mind is. In that sense, it can be relaxing or entertaining at the most.

Consider the example of watching TV, a two-year-old can rejoice in watching TV as much as a forty-year-old. On the surface it may seem that watching

television is a harmless activity but it is not so for your mind. Your brain has to constantly process visual data coming from millions of pixels and frames that are changing at an incredible speed, it has to process auditory signals coming from the television. In addition, it has to filter out all the other noises and visual stimulation that may be in the room where you are watching the television. It is one of the reasons why even really boring programs can be interesting – your mind is engaged. Such fast processing leaves no time for any creativity, analysis or contemplation. By the time the program finishes, you may have more information than you did before but you will not end up more intelligent. It will dull you instead.

Even while playing most video games, where it might seem that the player is concentrating hard, the concentration is no more than elementary concentration. The player is expected to react quickly, the brain has to process information and act more instinctually than creatively. It is for this reason that playing video games or watching TV does little to enhance your creativity. Your brain gets tired of the constant processing and it results in tiredness of the eyes. You could sit in the mountains, in a natural setting and look around all day without feeling the slightest mental fatigue or physical tiredness. But you do the same in front of a TV and you will be ready to sleep after a couple of hours.

The next time your 14-year-old tells you to get away because he's concentrating on completing the mission of his videogame, he's not lying, he *is* concentrating. However, feel free to remind him that this concentration would not help him in getting better grades. (No style of meditation is available to make a teenager listen to you though. You are at God's mercy or their mood, both of which are beyond analysis and predictability.)

Another example of elementary concentration is driving. Your brain is constantly processing information. Your mind is aware of the dangerous consequences in case of any lapse in the concentration, therefore it keeps itself mostly engaged. If you drive through the rush hour traffic, even though you are going much slower, it is more tiring because your brain has processed information for longer duration.

Passive Concentration

Everyone's mind is always maintaining this form of concentration – the passive concentration. Evolution over the past tens of thousands of years has taught our brains to be on the watch. You are climbing stairs and it knows you have to lift

your foot by so many inches. It is constantly processing information, it is watching out for threats, hurdles and challenges. It is the reason why even if you don't do anything for a whole day, you may still feel tired and still require sleep in the night. Concentration is mind at work.

There are other examples where passive concentration is explicitly at work. Think of someone fishing. He may be talking, reading, lying down while fishing, but a part of his mind is concentrated on the fishing rod. The moment there's even a slight movement, the passivity of the concentration takes an active stage and the reflexes spring into action.

In all forms of concentration, a degree of alertness and focus is required because that's what concentration is about – forging ahead with focus and alertness.

One pointed concentration for meditation requires both alertness and focus in equal degrees. Lose alertness and you will experience laziness. Lose focus and you experience restlessness.

The two greatest demons in meditation – restlessness and laziness. The former robs you off your patience and the other costs you your lucidity.

Thankfully though, the sages in India have been practicing meditation for thousands of years. If scriptures are to be believed, it's more than 20,000 years and if you were to solely rely on archaeological evidence, it would be around 8,500 years. Either ways, it's been around long enough to have specific practices and methods that help you detect and correct flaws in your meditation.

The next critical element of meditation which is not only the fundamental building block of meditation but also helps you to improve the quality of your concentration is… mindfulness.

kaccidetacchrutaṁ pārthatvayaikāgreṇacetasā,
kaccidajñāna-sammohaḥ praṇaṣṭastedhanañ-jaya.

naṣṭomohaḥ smṛtirlabdhātvat-prasādānmayācyuta,
sthito 'smigata-sandehaḥ kariṣyevacanaṁ tava.[21]

"Did you listen to me with concentration, O great archer?" Krishna asks Arjuna. "If you did, your ignorance must have vanished by now. A natural sense of dispassion must have arisen."

"Yes, my Lord God," Arjuna replies, "With your grace, my path is clear and I've found my mindfulness. I'll remain firmly established on the path and act as I should."

Mindfulness

Once Buddha and Ananda were walking by the riverside. Ananda had posed a question a few minutes ago and Buddha was deeply engrossed in answering that. In the course of that stroll, a fly came and sat on Buddha's forehead. As anyone would do, he raised his hand to shoo away the fly. All this while, he did not stop talking or walking. He continued to deliver the sermon and Ananda listened raptly as ever.

A few steps later, Buddha stopped and slowly repeated the gesture as if there sat another fly on his forehead when in fact, there was none. This intrigued Ananda.

"O Sage, please enlighten me," he requested. "Why did you wave your hand when there was nothing on your forehead."

"Listen carefully, O Ananda," Buddha spoke with his usual grace. "The first time the fly had come and sat on my face, I shooed it away. But there was no mindfulness in that action. It seemed like a reflex action when it wasn't so at all. From the moment, the fly came to when I shooed it, many thoughts had emerged and disappeared in my mind. I had realized there was a fly, my mind thought to drive it away, it instructed my hand to perform the needful action, my hand did so, my eyes registered the fly flying away, my mind accepted it, and my hand returned to its original position. It was a visceral response. I only became aware of it afterwards. Such conduct does not suit a meditator. A good meditator performs every action with utmost mindfulness.

Therefore, I stopped and repeated the action with mindfulness so I may avoid making the same mistake again. A good monk ought to be aware at all times."

Every day, we perform hundreds of actions that are neither handled by our intelligence nor intellect. Instead, they are done instinctually. From the perspective of meditation, those reflex actions arising out of our habits and tendencies only show a lack of mindfulness. No doubt, they play an important role when it comes to our survival but most of the time our actions are not as much about survival. They are merely our mindless response. A man was speeding on a windy road in the mountains.

While turning a tight corner another car came from the opposite direction cutting it a little too close. There was a young woman driver in that car.

“Pig!” she yelled.

“You pig!” the man screamed. Enraged and worked up he put his foot on the gas and just when he turned around the corner, there was a sturdy pig waiting for him in the middle. To avoid hitting the hog, he turned bit more to the left and the next moment he was crashing four hundred feet down a gorge.

Our mindless behaviour is the primary cause behind most of our suffering. We end up thinking, saying and doing things that we didn’t want to. Subsequently, we feel guilty. Sometimes we want to apologize but our ego starts to justify our mindless actions. Before we know it we have caused some serious damage to our relationships.

At the heart of any good meditation, regardless of the nature of your meditation, is the art of mindfulness. It is important to point out that mindfulness is not merely ‘awareness’ as commonly understood (or misunderstood). In the context of meditation, mindfulness has a very specific purpose and is of two types, namely, active mindfulness and contemplative mindfulness.

Contemplative or discriminative mindfulness is used to make mindful choices (rather than reacting or going with the first feeling that comes to mind) in ordinary situations in life. This is what most people mean when they talk about being mindful. Contemplative mindfulness is also the basis of analytical enquiry (another term for contemplative meditation).

Active mindfulness, on the other hand, aids a meditator’s concentration to remain lucid, sharp and strong. Its function is to ensure that the mind of a meditator is focused on the object of meditation without getting distracted. Active mindfulness checks the emergence and flow of discursive thoughts. From here on, unless otherwise specified, whenever I use the term mindfulness, please know that I mean active mindfulness.

Asanga’s text *Abhidharmasamucchaya* explains, “What is mindfulness? It is a retentive power that does not forget something already familiarized. Precisely, its function is to prevent the mind from being overcome by distraction.” The text of *Mahamudra* by Dakpo Tashi Namgyal goes on to elucidate mindfulness in meditation as “a special kind of mindfulness, and an indispensable means for realizing tranquillity.”

The two other types of mindfulness described before represent discriminating mindfulness, which has a role in differentiating or analyzing things but which must be abandoned in meditational equipoise.

When you nurture and master active mindfulness in meditation, contemplative mindfulness emerges automatically in your daily

life. It is a natural outcome of good meditation. Mindfulness in meditation is not a state of passive receptivity that you are simply observing your thoughts or that you are mindful of what is happening around you, or that even you are mindful of your thoughts in a non-judgemental way.

It is not bare attention.

On the contrary, mindfulness must be looked upon as the ever awake watch guard standing at the door of your mind. As soon as a discursive thought or a disturbing emotion emerges on the canvas of your mental imagery, mindfulness is the guard that alerts your mind. Along with alertness, it closes the door to your fortress so you may continue to concentrate uninterrupted.

It is stated most beautifully in Thannassiro Bhikku's translation of *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, 7.63:

> "Just as a royal frontier fortress has a gatekeeper – wise, experienced, intelligent – to keep out those he doesn't know and to let in those he does, for the protection of those within, and to ward off those without; in the same way, a disciple of the noble ones is mindful, endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering and recollecting what was done and said a long time ago. With mindfulness as his gatekeeper, the disciple of the noble ones abandons what is unskilful, develops what is skilful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is blameless, and looks after himself with purity."

It is not possible to meditate correctly in the absence of good concentration. Even in the eight-limbed yoga of Patanjali, he's put concentration before meditation. This is because concentration is the basis of good meditation. Good concentration, however, is impossible to develop without mindfulness.

Negative thoughts and emotions of hate, greed, jealousy, anger and so on will disrupt your meditation. Stimulating thoughts of lust, sex and sensuality can interfere with your tranquillity. Even positive thoughts of joy, success and celebration can cause restlessness. Passive thoughts of guilt, resentment, remorse and sadness can destroy your concentration. However remember, all these are thoughts ultimately, and the singular way to overcome them, so you may carry on with your meditation, is to deploy the guard of mindfulness at the main door of your mind.

Mindfulness, as a good guard, knowing that the emperor has forbidden any and every one from entering the palace, will not communicate with any visitor (thought). Its job is not to discriminate and find out who is fit to go in. The guard of mindfulness is deployed to keep the door shut for all outsiders.

In order for mindfulness to be effective it is aided by a very critical element…

Maitreya: Illuminated Conqueror, when does one achieve the perfect path of tranquility?

Buddha: Maitreya, when one completely eliminates sluggishness and sleepiness.

Maitreya: Illuminated Conqueror, when does one achieve perfect insight?

Buddha: Maitreya, when one completely eliminates sensual incitement and resentment.[22]

Alertness

There was a famous dog trainer in the USA, who had earned the reputation of training any puppy to poo only outside within a span of just three days. He said he only used positive reinforcement.

He would take the pooch out for a walk. Once close to a tree or a small garden, he would stand and wait until the dog went about its business. The moment the dog finished, the trainer would jump up and down shouting in sheer joy. He would punch the air, do a little dance, jig his hips and sing a happy song. Immediately after, he would hug the dog and pat it. All in all, he would display his happiness and ecstasy in all manners possible over the dog's poo. And it worked like a charm. The dog instantly sensed that its action of peeing or pooing made the trainer very happy. It would wag its tail, circle around, jump in joy and sometimes even do somersaults. Within three days, the dog would learn to alert its owner whenever it needed to attend to nature's call. This was done with positive reinforcement alone. Some of the clients of the dog trainer, however, complained that their dogs exhibited rather strange behaviour once they took them home. They said that the dog was definitely not fully trained. Sometimes, they would be watching an intense game of soccer or baseball, quietly sitting on the couch with their dog.

Then their team would score an impossible goal or hit a homerun, and they would jump off the couch in glee, punch the air, shout a big 'yes', do a little dance and even hug their dog. What the dogs did is nobody's guess!

Alertness of the mind is like training the puppy. Once it is trained, and if you replicate the same circumstances, it'll produce the same outcome. This is one of the most rewarding outcomes of correct meditation, in fact. The mindfulness and alertness you cultivate during the meditation stays with you long after you've gotten up and resumed your daily activities.

If mindfulness is the watch guard at the palace door then alertness is the police at the city gates. It is on patrol to see if there's anything suspicious going on anywhere in the kingdom. It arrests any bad elements before they can reach

and harm the royalty.

An amateur archer is unable to hit the bull's-eye with the same consistency as a champion archer. An expert archer is even able to shoot down moving objects like a bird. The more trained he is, the more accurately he is able to hit the mark. In due course, with practice and focus, he is able to spot and hit farther objects, so far that an ordinary person may not even see the object. The range and accuracy of his shots increases dramatically with disciplined practice.

Alertness is the champion archer in meditation.

When you continue to practice correctly, there comes a time when you are able to detect the emergence of the thought even before mindfulness has to guard it from interfering with your meditation. Just like there's a tiny-tiny fraction of second from the moment you press an electric switch to when the light comes on, there's a gap between the emergence of one thought and the next. As you develop razor-sharp alertness, you are able to see the emergence of a thought long before it manifests fully in your mind. It's like if you were standing on a very high mountain peak, you would be able to see sunrise and sunset before those who are on the plains.

Mindfulness and Alertness

When I first started with intense practice, I didn't fully understand the difference between mindfulness and alertness. They sounded almost identical to me. But after practicing for a few thousand hours, something remarkable happened. I discovered that if you are able to detect a thought with alertness just before it forms fully in your mind, the thought disappears on its own,as if alertness actually shot it down. It frees up mindfulness to do its job better and your quality of meditation goes up dramatically.

When you naturally develop an all pervading mindfulness because alertness is doing its job, the effort in meditation disappears. This is the stage when meditation stops being an act. It becomes your second nature. And after a while, it becomes your state of mind.

During my time in the Himalayas, I started experiencing intense sensations in my entire body. Within moments, they would travel and establish firmly in my forehead. For the next few minutes, they would continue to build up and cover my entire head, the palate of my mouth and my cheeks. Sometimes they were distracting but most of the times they would help me slip into very deep meditation. This was so for the primary reason that these sensations would force

me to focus automatically.

Imagine you are trying to write something but someone comes and tickles you. If you are someone who is tickled easily, your attention would automatically be drawn to the tickling.

This was the case with me too. The sensations would become so intense as if someone was kneading my brain inside (gently) and I couldn't think of anything but be automatically focused on my object of concentration. I used to meditate on a mantra I was initiated into.

This phenomenon of intense (sometimes unbearable) sensations began when I realized that mindfulness and alertness were working in tandem, in perfect coordination. Initially, for the first one thousand hours of meditation, these sensations would subside when I stopped meditating. Admittedly, the period when I didn't meditate was no more than 2 or 3 hours on most days. Yet, I could feel that those sensations were not there.

After a while though, it changed. The sensations would not stop even if I wasn't meditating. No matter whether I tried to read, walk, eat, bathe or sleep, these sensations would not cease. Sometimes I didn't want to be alert or be mindful. I just wanted to be restful but I'd hit a point of no return. The only time I get a respite from these constant sensations is when I go to sleep. Even then, it takes me one hour of careful meditation and a series of movements (where I change my body posture exactly three times in a certain way) to take these sensations to the peak and then bring them down in three stages before I can fall asleep.

The moment you learn (and it happens only with practice) to have your mindfulness, alertness and concentration flow together, you become a living Buddha. Positive and loving emotions continue to rise to the brim like bubbles do in carbonated water. Yogic texts, notably Buddhist sutras, give a wonderful name to alertness. They call it *saṃprajñā.* It means a state of even awareness. *Saṃyutta Nikāya* defines alertness as knowing both events in the mind and activities of the body as they are happening:

> And how is a monk alert? There is the case where feelings are known to the monk as they arise, known as become established, known as they subside. Thoughts are known to him as they arise, known as they become established, known as they subside. Perceptions are known to him as they arise, known as they become established, known as they subside. This is how a monk is alert.
>
> And how is a monk alert? When going forward & returning, he makes himself alert; when looking toward & looking away… when bending & extending his limbs… when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe, and his bowl… when eating, drinking, chewing, and savouring…

> when urinating and defecating… when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, he makes himself alert. This is how a monk is alert.[23]

It is pertinent to add here that alertness not only allows you to detect and check the flow of thoughts, but also all other flaws including, but not limited to, emotions, dullness, restlessness, loss of clarity, random images and sleepiness.

Now that you know the role of attention, posture, mindfulness and alertness in meditation, you are ready to understand the various types of meditations available to you followed by how to actually practice them.

The Practice of Meditation

- ✧ Before You Begin
- ✧ Concentrative Meditation
- ✧ Contemplative Meditation
- ✧ Mindful Meditation
- ✧ Observant Meditation
- ✧ Spirited Meditation

tatra pratyaya-ikatānatā dhyānam.
tadeva-artha-mātra-nirbhāsaṁ svarūpa-śūnyam-iva-samādhiḥ.
trayam-ekatra saṁyamaḥ.
tajjayāt prajñālokaḥ.[24]

Repeated mindful concentration on one thought results in an uninterrupted stream of consciousness leading to meditation. True insight (absorption) occurs when the meditator and object of meditation become one rising above all perceptions and forms. In that state of union when the adept combines concentration, contemplation and absorption, it leads to the dawning of supreme realization. Mastery of this meditation bestows upon the adept absolute wisdom of all perceptible phenomena.

Before You Begin

Before you begin the practice of meditation, I wanted to briefly elaborate on the various systems of meditation. When you perfect one form of meditation, mastering all other forms becomes relatively easier. A good warrior, who knows the art of war, is generally an adept in using more than just one type of weapon. He may have to use a sword at times and mace at other times. Sometimes, he may have to put his skills of archery to use and wrestle in another situation.

Different strategies are required to deal with different situations in life. You can't always be firm, you can't always be soft. Similarly, different systems of meditation are needed to handle various aspects of our lives. Before I spell out the various systems and how to adopt them, I would like to share a famous story from the life of Buddha.

During his nationwide travels, when Buddha was spreading the message of peace and compassion in India, he once stopped in a village with his disciples in tow. The villagers were religious and some of them despised Buddha for he had proclaimed there was no God. They were unhappy at his arrival and believed he would pollute the minds of others. They got together and confronted him. Calling him an atheist, they unleashed a slur of swear words and asked him to leave.

Buddha showed no reaction, did not respond at all and continued to smile elusively as usual. His impenetrable mask of peace and serenity showed not the slightest crack.

After the long tirade, the villagers got tired and stormed off. Buddha assumed his yogic posture and sat under the tree as if nothing had happened. His disciples, however, were distressed and rattled at the disparaging, dishonorable and unfitting reception of their master.

"O Venerable One!" Shariputra, his close disciple, said to Buddha, "how come your holiness said nothing? Did it not bother you?"

"If someone offers you a gift and you refuse to take it, to whom does it belong, Shariputra?"

“It will remain with the one who offered it, Master,” Shariputra replied after some thought.

“In much the same manner, my spiritual son, I refused verbal gifts of the villagers,” Buddha added. “How could I react to something that caused no provocation, something I did not even accept?”

In the above mentioned story, Buddha demonstrated perfect fusion of the various types of meditation. In the middle of provocation, he continued to concentrate on what he was doing. His years of practicing concentrative meditation gave him the stillness of mind so they could not provoke him. With contemplation, he knew that these people had no role to play in the big scheme of things, that they were simply yelling some words that were inherently empty. With perfect mindfulness, he did not take any action that he might regret later on. He was mindful of what he was doing and thinking. Finally, he just played a passive witness.

He carried himself independent of the misdemeanor shown to him. He chose to be an observer.

On the path of meditation, if you intensify your practice one day, the best way of giving yourself a break is to alternate between various systems of meditation. For example, let’s suppose that you are mastering concentrative meditation – a type of meditation that requires building intense concentration. When you are tired of an hour of concentrative meditation, you could switch to walking or spirited meditation for a little while and then go back to your primary practice (concentrative meditation in the current example).

Alternating between various methods strengthens and trains your mind in the most effective way. It’s like the ultimate boot camp of meditation. If you persist diligently, mindfully, attentively, patiently and enthusiastically, success is certain. Let me get to the actual practice of various forms of meditation.

yatrōparamatē cittaṁ nirud'dhaṁ yōgasēvayā,
yatra caivātmanātmānaṁ paśyannātmani tuṣyati[25].

With the constant practice of yoga, in that state of perfect stillness of the mind, the yogi experiences his true nature. With his supremely purified self, attained as a result of meditation, he remains firmly established in his primordial state.

Concentrative Meditation

Committed to the practice of meditation but not getting anywhere, a disciple approached his master and said, “I’m feeling really bored and restless. I’m unable to meditate.”

“Don’t worry, don’t react. It’ll pass. Don’t lose your resolve.

Stay course,” the guru said.

Another few weeks later he sounded really excited and said, “Oh, I’m having the greatest time of my life. Meditation has never been so good.”

“Don’t be so pleased, don’t react. It’ll pass too. Don’t lose sight of your path,” warned the guru.

Yet, another week later a dejected disciple stood in front of his guru lamenting he was experiencing none of the meditational equipoise and bliss he had been enjoying until last week.

“Please tell me master what should I do?’

“Nothing at all, this too shall pass. Stay course,” said the guru calmly.

This is how your sessions of meditation are going to be like for the first few thousand hours. There’ll be good days and there’ll be bad days. There will be days when you’ll have had perfect sessions of meditation and there will be days when you’ll want to give up altogether. The key is to persist. As you gain perfection though, the act of meditation begins to disappear. It metamorphoses into a state, it is no longer an act but a state – the meditative state. You remain in a meditative state regardless of what you may be doing. In that state, you experience the same stillness, quietude and alertness that you do at the peak of your meditation practice. Of the six types of meditation, concentrative meditation is the hardest of all. It specifically works on breaking the hardened tendencies of mind, and our mind loathes nothing more than being tamed. It wants to be free and dictatorial. Concentrative meditation turns the mind of a meditator into a genie – available

to serve you at your command, however you please.

One of the greatest rewards of concentrative meditation is the irreversible

transformation it brings in you. Your habits, thoughts, emotions no longer provoke you like the earlier times. Internal or external triggers don't throw you off balance.

Imagine someone is attacking you verbally, they are saying things that are untrue and they are trying to hurt your sentiments. If they succeed in such provocation, you may yell back at them or get angry yourself. If you get angry, you have lost the battle. What if you just didn't feel angry at all? There is a subtle difference in not feeling angry versus not expressing it. If you get angry but don't express it, such suppression causes emotional damage.

What if you just didn't feel angry, what if no undesirable reaction sprouted in you? Essentially, this is what concentrative meditation does. Your mindfulness and alertness rises to a degree that you are able to choose your response at all times without falling prey to negative emotions. It comes naturally from the stillness of body and mind. The noise of thoughts become feeble and they lose their steam.

In concentrative meditation, you settle your mind on your chosen object of meditation which could be an image, breath, a mantra or plain void. While the other five methods of meditation are a lot more lenient about your body posture, concentrative meditation requires complete mastery of your posture. This is mostly because success in this form of meditation demands complete stillness of the body.

Until you are able to achieve perfect stillness, you will not be able to lose body consciousness, that is, you will continue to have distracting awareness of your body during your sessions of meditation. And till the time you are able to completely rise above your body, you are not going to experience any cosmic oneness. Until you are able to achieve perfect stillness, all your experiences are going to be mere intellectual fabrication, they will have no intrinsic value and will remain mostly meaningless. Such experiences are not replicable. They do not purify, cleanse, guide or strengthen you; this is the harsh truth. An intense practice of concentration stills the ten vital energies in your body helping you gain complete control in sitting still like a rock with ease.

How to Do It Right

Stillness of the body and mind comes with great practice. Here's how to perform concentrative meditation:

1. Sit in a comfortable posture, preferably crossed-legged.
2. Keep your back and head straight. Neck, slightly bent, just only.
3. Abandon all body movements.
4. Yoke your focus on any object.
5. Maintain great mindfulness.

Please review and follow the eight elements of a yogic posture and the six principles of meditation. They are entirely applicable to the practice of concentrative meditation. Once seated comfortably but correctly, start building your focus on your chosen object of meditation with complete alertness and mindfulness. Your mind will go north and south, but you must bring it back to your point of concentration. You'll be hit by thoughts, just gently bring it back. Images will flash, emotions will rise – let them. You just gently bring your attention back to your point of focus.

Madhyamaka Hridya states, "If one is overcome with distraction, one should retreat and regard it as being a harmful sign of perceptive diversion."[26] Thus, whenever you discover that your mind is getting bombarded with other thoughts and emotions (which it will), simply understand that they are distractions. Ignore them and carry on with your concentration. Remember that thoughts are merely thoughts, devoid of any essence. Don't analyze, pursue, accept, process or examine any thought whatsoever. Our goal is to build non-discriminatory, unblemished, sharp and lucid concentration. If you are meditating correctly, the craving for sensory pleasures will disappear on its own.

Each time your mind wanders off, bring it back to the point of focus. Over time you will develop razor-sharp awareness; so that, you will become aware of each emerging thought before it turns into a distraction.

If you find yourself slouching or leaning in any of the four directions, just gently correct your posture. Don't forget to maintain a gentle smile and steadily retain focus on your chosen object.

I must reiterate that it is absolutely critical to note that during concentrative meditation, you must stay away from all intellectual examination, contemplation and cogitation. For example, let us say, that you are meditating on a form, of Krishna's idol in front of you. Do not start examining the characteristics of the idol or start thinking about Krishna, his pastimes, his life and so forth. Just keep your attention focused at his form. In the initial stages, if you start contemplating before attaining one-pointed concentration, your mind will wander off and you may not even realize.

Do not accept, reject, examine, follow, engage in or pursue your thoughts. Simply do not act or react. Just gently maintain your concentration. Maintain short but crisp and lucid sessions of meditation. An untamed mind cannot stay on a thought for any longer than a few seconds. I would recommend that rather than doing one session of 45 minutes, do three lucid and crisp sessions of fifteen minutes. They will bring much greater benefit. Over time, as you get better, you can gradually increase the duration. I would also like to tell you that there is no joy in concentrative meditation, in the actual practice. But once you start to experience a quiescent mind, you will be addicted to meditation.

Four Types of Objects to Meditate On

Repeatedly, I've used the term 'object of meditation'. What do I mean by that? This brings me to the four types of objects to choose from when it comes to concentrative meditation. You can pick any of the four and you should also feel free to switch from one to the other, either to find out what suits you better or to give your mind a break. For example, if you are meditating on a form and are tired after 60 minutes but you wish to continue your session for another half an hour, you could meditate on your breath or anything else. Change refreshes the mind and brings the lucidity back in meditation.

Meditation on Form

It is one of the most common and most misunderstood forms of meditation. I say 'misunderstood' because meditation on a form doesn't mean that you keep a pebble, picture or an idol in front of you and stare at it. That is neither meditation nor concentration. Your mind will continue to hop about while you gaze at an external form. In reality, meditating on a form is one of the most difficult and tiring form of meditation but it does result in superior concentration. Regardless of whether the form you are meditating on is external or internal, it is always an internal visualization.

For example, you may have a pebble in front of you. It's a simple form and you decide to meditate on the pebble to build your mindfulness and concentration. Here's how to do it right, step-by-step:

1. Sit in the yogic posture correctly and comfortably.
2. Observe the pebble for a couple of minutes. Be mindful to not analyze the pebble for why it's shaped a certain way or has a certain color and so on.

Simply observe it with the intention to hold the image in your mind.
3. Close your eyes and begin visualizing the image of the pebble.
4. After a while, a few seconds, the image of pebble will fade. At that time, gently bring it back to your focus and you will be able to visualize it lucidly again.
5. When you hit a point that you simply can't bring the image of the pebble in front of your mind, gently open your eyes, stay in the posture and look at the pebble again for a minute or two and then follow the same process of visualization as above.

Initially, the image will fade every few seconds but with practice, you'll be able to hold the image for much longer in front of your inner eye. After a while, your mind will get tired and you may feel exhausted.

You are free to open your eyes and gaze at the pebble again to regain the lucidity of your object of meditation. It is important to visualize internally because remember you are meditating on a form and not simply concentrating on it. Let me explain the subtle difference between the two. When you are meditating, your mind is flowing like a continuous stream and you become more mindful of the boulders of thoughts that may come your way. Meditation is the art of being aware, super-aware in fact. Concentration is simply a way of maintaining your focus. Good concentration leads to great meditation.

You are also free to choose an internal visualization without any external physical form. To meditate like this, just think of anything that pleases you. It should not be something that excites or arouses you physically or emotionally. Just something you find pleasing, joyous. It could be an image of your chosen deity, the sight of the ocean, a peacock with its covert spread into a fan, anything at all. Close your eyes and start visualizing the object. The image will keep disappearing from your vision, gently keep bringing it back. It requires great concentration to hold the mental image in front of you.

After about 3,000 hours of practice, you'll be able to hold the mental image without the slightest of fading for roughly four minutes. After 10,000 hours of practice (if you fancy being a siddha), you will be able to hold the image in your mind for as long as you wish. It's a remarkable state, beyond any description, to have such supreme one pointed concentration.

Meditation on Breath

Meditating on your breath is the easiest form of concentrative meditation. While strengthening your mindfulness and alertness, it also has great calming effect on the mind. It is particularly useful in tackling restlessness that one experiences during meditation. While meditating on the breath, do not practice pranayama (alternate breathing) or any other yogic forms of breathing. Just breathe normally and watch your breath, pay attention to inhalation and exhalation. Concentrate on your breath. You can keep your eyes open or closed as you like. Here's how to do it right:

1. Sit comfortably in the yogic posture.
2. Breathe deeply and normally for a few minutes with both nostrils.
3. Close your eyes, or lower your eyelids a bit if you don't wish to completely close your eyes.
4. Simply listen to your inhalation.
5. Pay attention to the small pause that occurs when inhaling ends and exhaling starts.
6. Listen to your exhalation.

It's the best meditation to do when you feel restless or anxious. It empties your mind and calms you down. Please note that you must not hold your breath after inhalation (as done in some breathing exercises). Instead, simply just listen to your breath going in and breath going out. Over time, the duration of your breath (both while inhaling and exhaling) extends automatically helping you retain more *prana*, vital life force, from your breathing.

On a side note, sometimes when you can't fall asleep at night. Just lie down in your most comfortable posture. Be absolutely still and meditate on your breath. A great calmness will come over you and you will fall asleep. Some sleep on their left or right side, some like to sleep on their tummy and some on their back. Before meditating on your breath to fall asleep, it is important to lie in the posture you normally go to sleep in. Whether trying to meditate while sleeping or meditating while awake, physical movements disrupt meditation.

Meditation on Sound

This is one of the most ancient forms of meditations and I've personally invested many thousand hours in this form. Meditation on sound requires you to meditate on a repetitive sound. It can be a mantra or any pleasant sound you like – vocal or instrumental. The only condition is that it must be repetitive because you are

training your mind to stay on one thing for very long periods of time.

Once again like meditating on a form, meditation on sound is not simply listening to a certain music or mantra. It's not about chanting that mantra. Parrots do relentless chanting, they don't gain enlightenment. Chanting a mantra, even mentally, is not the same as meditating on a mantra. There is a subtle but significant difference in chanting or meditating. Even if you are chanting out loud, whispering or mentally chanting, it is still an act of speaking. It will not allow you to merge in the sound.

The auditory consciousness will be a hindrance. Meditating on a mantra means recalling that mantra gently, one after another. Recollection is quite different from speaking. Recollection requires certain visualization. Before you recall, your brain visualizes it. It happens fast but nevertheless it happens.

Here is how to do it right:

1. Sit comfortably in the yogic posture.
2. Listen to the sound for a few minutes if you are meditating on an external sound and then turn off the source, or simply chant the mantra a few times if you are meditating on a mantra.
3. Breathe deeply for about five minutes with both nostrils.
4. Close your eyes or half-close them if you like.
5. Start recalling the sound you just heard. Or start recalling the mantra you just chanted if you are meditating on a mantra.

It is best to meditate on a mantra you have been initiated into.

The power of initiation cannot be overstated, however this is not the right place to go in detail regarding initiation. If you haven't been initiated in any mantra yet and you really wish to meditate on a mantra, feel free to do so. When it comes to meditating on a mantra, there are no hard and fast rules. All those rules apply when you want to invoke a mantra according to the science of mantras (which is a different subject matter altogether). Thus, initiation is the least of our worries when meditating on a mantra. The sacred syllables of the mantra silently work on your inner transformation.

When chanting on a mantra, if you simply maintain the same pace during a session, you may experience periods of restlessness and torpor more quickly and frequently. Feel free to vary your pace to retain freshness and clarity. For example, let's say you are meditating on the simple mantra of Shiva, *Om Namah Shivaya*.

Once you've chanted a few times, mentally start recalling the mantra:

Om – Namah – Shivaya.
Om – Namah – Shivaya.
Om – Namah – Shivaya.

Here, the en-dash '–' indicates a small pause.

If you experience restlessness while meditating, just slow down the recall. It could be:

O–m – Nam–ah – Shiv–aya.
O–m – Nam–ah – Shiv–aya.
O–m – Nam–ah – Shiv–aya.

You could slow it down even further by adding more pauses or longer pauses. For example:

O–m – Na—m–ah – Sh—iv–a—ya.

Or even longer:

O———m———Na———m———ah – Sh———iv———aya, and so on.

If you experience laziness or dullness, you could reduce the number of pauses and increase the pace of recall. This is the best way to maintain your concentration with mindfulness and alertness. It keeps the mind alive and focused.

Meditation on Formless

Some people have a natural disliking for forms and sounds. They find meditating on their breath pointless. Fortunately, there's another practice in concentrative meditation where you can mediate on void, or on the formless as it's called.

If you wish to meditate on the formless, there are two ways to do so. Here's how to do it correctly:

1. Assume your yogic posture.
2. Deep breathe a few times to normalize your energies.
3. Simply close your eyes and remain thought free. That's it.

Please note that being thought free is not the same as observing your thoughts. You must not observe or watch your thoughts while meditating on the formless.

Instead, it is a practice where mind is directly looking at itself. Meditation on the formless is the hardest to do without guidance because there are a few subtle points which can only be demonstrated and not documented. A master is a must if you wish to champion this form.

On my own journey, it took me more than one thousand hours to just be able to recognize correctly the difference between loss of clarity (a subtle form of dullness where you feel thoughts have subsided) versus actual thoughtlessness. I remember the first time I started experiencing thoughtlessness with perfect awareness; it was such an unusual state of mind that I felt nauseated. Due to intense practice, my mind could remain thoughtless but my body thought something was going wrong within. This went on for more than 300 hours spread over 6 months. But once past that stage, being thoughtless was one the most beautiful states of mind. It was like the calm lake on a sunny day. You feel complete, rested, at once at peace. Thoughtlessness of the mind with awareness is a feeling like no other. You feel life bubbling inside you, you get in touch with your soul. It's the audience falling pin-drop silence after a thunderous applause just before the beginning of a great opera performance.

The other form of meditation on the formless is called **expansive meditation**. In this you experience yourself merging in the supreme consciousness. Here's how to do it right:

1. As always, sit comfortably in the yogic posture.
2. Deep breathe a few times.
3. Visualize a bright, effulgent light or a dark infinite universe. This is the expansive aspect in this meditation.
4. Gradually visualize that your body is disintegrating and merging in the vast, expansive, infinite universe.

When I experimented with this meditation and after about two thousand hours, I could not even walk or look at any object for any more than three minutes. It would feel that everything was merging in me or that I was merging in everything around me (there's no difference whether the universe merges in you or you merge in the universe). It was a deep dive of bliss but the one that would not allow me to do anything else. It took me more than six months to learn how to assimilate this bliss and still carry on with the normal activities of my life. Like the other meditation on the formless, this too requires precise guidance from a champion meditator because success in this form depends on correctly

detecting and removing many subtle flaws.

While doing concentrative meditation, you could do the visualization between your brows, on the tip of your nose or on your heart chakra. Meditating between the brows leads to greater sensations. Visualizing on your heart chakra brings greater calmness. You don’t have to literally turn your gaze on to those points, you just have to visualize there. Sometimes, I see people staring at their nose or between their brows. I find it hilarious. The degree of misconceptions in our world and how sometimes we accept things without verifying them. Such meditation is unnatural and it’s impossible to rise above your body consciousness if you are going to force your gaze by literally looking at the tip of your nose or between your brows.

Your posture should remain the standard yogic posture of meditation.

Now that we have gone past the most arduous meditation, let me walk you through the easier types.

ciddharmā sarvadeheṣu viśeṣo nāsti kutracit,
ataśca tanmayaṃ sarvaṃ bhāvayānbhavajijjanaḥ.

vihāya nijadehasthaṃ sarvatrāsmīti bhāvayan,
dṛḍhena manasā dṛṣṭayā nānyekṣiṇyā sukhī bhavet.[27]

The same indivisible, supreme consciousness runs through all embodied forms. The one who contemplates on all creation pervaded by that consciousness, transcends relative existence. Rising above the consideration for one's own body, one should contemplate with a firm mind that, "I am everywhere". It brings about a profound realization and bliss in the seer who then clearly sees only one reality, that he is one without a second.

Contemplative Meditation

There was a herdsman in a village who used to take his cattle out to the river every day. He would spend his day letting the cattle roam around, while he rested under the trees, ate his lunch, and then take them back in the evening. This was his life until he met a monk who had recently built his hut on the riverside. Every day, the cowherd saw this monk sitting still and doing nothing.

“What do you do sitting here all day?” he gathered his courage and questioned the monk one day.

“I meditate.”

“What’s meditation?”

“It’s a way to realize God.”

“Can I also meditate?” the herdsman asked innocently.

Out of compassion, the monk explained to him the various aspects of meditation and told him to meditate on light between his brows with mindfulness and alertness. He pointed him to a nearby cave where he could sit during the day and meditate without any interruptions. The herdsman listened with rapt attention. Two days later, he met the monk again.

“How did it go?” the monk asked.

“It was very difficult,” he said. “I couldn’t focus at all. I kept worrying about my home, cattle and I couldn’t see any light between my brows.”

The monk gave him a different method and told him to meditate on his breath and asked him to report back in three days’ time.

“Could you meditate this time?”

“I don’t know, sir, how to tell you this,” the cowherd said lowering his head, “but I just kept falling asleep. Listening to your breath is a wonderful way to fall asleep.”

The monk tried many methods but nothing worked. The mind of the cowherd kept wandering off. Finally, one day, the monk said to him, “Tell me what or who do you love the most?”

“The most?” he reconfirmed. “Yes, who do you love the most?”

“I have a beautiful bull. I call him Hira. He’s my heart. He’s got silky smooth down, wide chest, strong body and huge horns. He’s the king of my herd, I’m merely the caretaker.”

“Meditate on Hira then,” the monk replied and told him to just visualize his bull and report back in three days’ time again.

Three days later, however, the herdsman didn’t turn up. Two more days passed and then another two but the cowherd didn’t return. Worried, the monk went towards his cave and saw that all his cattle were sitting outside. He knocked on the door of the cave but no response came. He knocked again and a couple of times more.

“Who’s this?” a voice asked from the inside.

“Are you okay? How’s your meditation?” the monk asked him.

“I’m great. I can’t stop meditating. I feel like I’m Hira.” “Come outside and tell me all about it!”

“I can’t,” the cowherd shouted, “my horns keep getting stuck at the narrow door!”

It was much easier for the cowherd to meditate on his bull as it is relatively easier for us to think about things we love. There’s no effort there. We are automatically drawn towards people and things we are attached to. Meditation is about discovering your natural playfield. In fact, the Tibetan word for meditation means to become familiar with oneself. When you contemplate on something for long enough, you start to acquire the properties of your object of meditation.

The basis of contemplative meditation is that eventually you become what you meditate on.

The seers realized this thousands of years ago and figured out that, by the same logic, if someone meditated on compassion, he would become an embodiment of compassion and that those who contemplated only on the negative aspects of their life keep attracting and manifesting more negativity. Mind does not understand good-bad, right-wrong, moral-immoral. These are the definitions we have fed into our conscious mind. At its root, mind only creates, understands and reacts to a thought.

Unlike concentrative meditation, contemplative does not require you to go through the rigours of perfecting your posture. Having said that, a perfect posture is a great aid any day. With superior concentration and stillness, you are able to do contemplative meditation lot more effectively.

Contemplative meditation leads to remarkable insight into the true nature of things, the realities of different planes of existence and into many things beyond

words.

The term *acala vipāśayanā is* used in meditation texts. It means the insight devoid of mental activity. Yasyaka, a Vedic scholar who lived before the eminent Sanskrit grammarian Panini in 700 BCE, defines *vipāśaya* as unfettering, or without a trace. And this is the key: when no trace of conditioned mind is left, you gain an insight rising above your intellect and calculations of the conditioned mind. This transcendental knowledge, true insight, comes from within. It is not the product of some conditioning, cogitation or deliberation. It is not some information you've gained from any book. Instead, this is the output of contemplative meditation. It springs forth from the primal source within you.

In truth, meditation is doing away with all labels and conditioning so the real you may rise to the surface.

Imagine your name is Hamish and someone in the market calls out your name. "Hamish!" you hear. Naturally, you will stop and look to see who called you. If they had shouted some other name, say Monica, you won't even look in that direction because you are not Monica, because you don't think of yourself as Monica. Similarly, when people direct their wrath or emotions, they are doing so at a label you have been assigned and not at you. For example, if someone says that all men are jerks. At that moment, if you identify yourself as a man, you may feel the urge to react. If, however, you see yourself as the divine soul, or as a compassionate person, if you do not consider yourself as one of the men in the "all men are jerks", you won't experience any surge of emotion at the statement.

Contemplative meditation helps you identify yourself with your truest nature, above all labels and conditioning, so that you no longer think of yourself just as a man or a woman with a body, or as a spouse, a citizen, a brother, a sister, a Hindu, a Christian and so on. Rising above these labels, you first learn and then realize that you are way beyond these constricting labels. You are independent of the labels society and even you have imposed on yourself.

The primary method of contemplative meditation is done by way of self-enquiry which is further divided into two types.

Self-Enquiry: Who Am I?

It begins with the fundamental question, "Who Am I?"

The goal is to understand that the true you, the real you, the indestructible you is beyond the labels and temporary nature of this world. Are you a son, a

daughter, a mother, a father, a brother, a husband, a wife, a friend, a manager, a CEO, a young person, an old person? Who are you? Perhaps you are some of these things, but these are mere labels, they are temporary.

These are the roles you play in the world but they only reflect your transient aspects. You were not a manager when you were born and you will cease to be one after you retire. Besides, these labels are dependent. Not only someone else has given them to you, they don't apply without the existence of some other entity. For example, you can't be a husband unless you have a wife, you can't be a CEO unless there's a company, you can't be a father unless you have a child and so on. Most people identify themselves with these temporary dockets and when these tags are removed, they feel they have lost their identity.

You may ask what is beyond these worldly labels anyway. A child thinks he or she is a child, a youth thinks he's a youth but that is temporary again. A child graduated out of infancy to become a toddler, a youth graduated out of childhood to be a youth, an old person is no longer the youth he once was. Are you a man, a woman? Are you the body? When someone causes you grief, who feels hurt in you – your body or your mind? Where is the mind? Once you negate everything perishable, all transient elements, all temporary labels, you are left with the purest element that defines you – the highest consciousness, the soul, the spirit – you may call it whatever name you wish to give.

> *tattvamasyādivākyena svātmā hi pratipāditaḥ,*
> *neti neti śrutirbrūyādanṛtaṃ pāñcabhautikam.*[28]
>
> By affirming that you are that (God, divinity, universe), you begin to see yourself beyond the limited existence of your body that's made up of the five elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether. Scriptures have called it Neti. Neti, meaning you are not this, not this.

The verse above is the soul of contemplative meditation. It encompasses both elimination and affirmation. Basically, it means that when you contemplate as to your reality, your true nature, anything material that comes to your mind, anything that is made up of the five elements is not you.

You touch your body. You are not just the body, you touch your wealth, you are not the wealth, your cars, assets and so on. All these things belong to you, you are the owner of these things but these acquisitions or attainments are not you.

Here are both the practices for you.

Eliminative Contemplation

In the practice of eliminative contemplation, you get rid of all the labels that you are not. You keep searching for that one permanent label that actually defines who you really are.

How to do it right

1. Sit in a comfortable position. Any comfortable position will do. You don't have to be seated in a yogic posture.
2. Take a few deep breaths.
3. Start the process of contemplation by negation, that is, keep eliminating what you are not.

Think of all the material things, one by one, that are perishable in nature. In fact, all material things are perishable for that matter. Contemplate on whatever you are attached to, and for each of those things, ask yourself if you are what you are attached to and remind yourself that you are not that thing. Various yogic texts and Upanishads provide a number of prompts as follows, feel free to add your own and eliminate all your attributes one by one.

I am not the body… I am not the mind.

I am not the senses… I am not the consciousness.

They are my servitors. I am eternal and beyond these.

I am not a man or a woman… I am not young or old.

I am not beautiful or ugly… I am not a friend or an enemy. I am not a father or a son (or a mother or a daughter).

I am not a husband or a wife…

These are mere classifications… I am eternal and beyond.

I am not pure or impure…I am not good or bad.

I am not hot or cold…I am not moral or immoral. I am not realized or unrealized…

These are mere dualities. I am eternal and beyond.

I am not bound or free… I am not hated or loved.

I am not happy or unhappy… I am not foolish or intelligent. I am neither successful nor a loser…

These are mere perspectives. I am eternal and beyond.

I am not weak or strong… I am not restless or lazy.

I am not tired or fresh… I am not healthy or unhealthy. I am not my past…

These are temporary states. I am eternal and beyond.

I cannot die, I cannot be sick, I cannot be hurt, I cannot be grieved.

I know no sorrow, I know no pain, I know no grief, I know no hurt.

I know no sickness, I lack nothing.

I am beyond the good and bad, beyond praise and criticism, beyond everything that can be thought or written, everything that can be heard or said, for, I am the indestructible, indivisible, infinite, eternal, supreme soul – the highest realization, the purest consciousness.

I am beyond birth and death, I have existed before the universe, I am an independent unit but part of a complete phenomenon. I *am* complete.

You could also do the aforesaid meditation in an interactive manner. That involves asking yourself the question and answering it. For example, you may say: “Am I the body?” And then answer it by saying, “No, I’m not the body.” You can do this for all of the above declarations and more.

When you do this regularly, something miraculous happens in your life after a while: you stop feeling bad and stop reacting to what others say or think about you. You no longer crave for things the world’s going crazy about because you don’t see yourself as a helpless body, or a man or a woman craving for love, prestige or respect, you don’t see yourself a tiny person in a vast universe anymore. Instead, you find that you are a universe yourself – complete, eternal, indestructible. These are not mere words or phrases, but simple truths that’ll empower you. One of the most powerful moments in anyone’s life is when you wake up to your own immensity.

After eliminative contemplation, you can go for the more detailed affirmative contemplation which expands the way you see, understand and treat yourself.

Starting with eliminative contemplation first helps to remove the layers of temporary labels off you. When you feel incredibly light after doing that, you can work on affirmations or contemplation by acceptance.

Affirmative Contemplation

After you have negated what you are not, reinforce what you are. Affirmative contemplation is the reinforcement of your true identity and it is this reinforcement – this knowledge – that will help you stay calm and blissful while operating the world. As an instance, when people criticize you or hurt you, at that moment you have to visualize who you really are, that they are merely saying things to your body and that you are beyond the body.

I have adapted the affirmations below from three Upanishads, the sacred texts expounding on the metaphysical and esoteric aspects of Vedic knowledge. You

can pick and choose what you like. They are merely there to guide you. The goal is to contemplate on all eternal elements as *you*.

How to do it right

1. Sit in a comfortable position. Any comfortable position will do. You don't have to be seated in a yogic posture.
2. Take a few deep breaths.
3. Start the process of contemplation by affirmation, that is, keep recalling what you are.
4. Here are the prompts:

I am I (the Self). I am That. I am Brahman. I am the Source. I am of all the worlds. I am He. I am Siddha. I am the Pure.

I am the Supreme. I am. I am always He. I am the Eternal. I am stainless.

I am Vijnana. I am the Excellent. I am Soma. I am the All. I am beyond honor or dishonor. I am beyond the dualities.

I am neither existence nor non-existence. I am beyond language. I am the Shining. I am the Glory of void and non-void.

I am the good and the bad. I am Happiness. I am beyond grief. I am Consciousness. I am awake. I am equal (in all).

I am the like and the non-like. I am that.

I am the eternal, the pure, and the ever felicitous.

I am the form of immeasurable Bliss. I am beyond body.

I am beyond bondage or emancipation. I am the pure Brahman. I am He.

I am ever of the form of deliberation and yet am beyond deliberation.

I am the earliest. I am beyond the contemplator and contemplation.

I am neither the thing defined nor non-defined. I am the non-absorbed Essence.

I am not the measurer, the measure or the measured. I am Shiva. I am the Seer of all. I am beyond the eyes. I am the Wise.

I am the Quiescent. I am the Destroyer. I am the doer of all actions. I am Pure Bliss. I am beyond the universe. I am of the form of all light.

I am the Light in Absolute Consciousness.

I am free from the three periods of time. I am beyond desires.

I am beyond body. I am the One that has no body. I am beyond compare.

I am solely the thing that is of the nature of wisdom. I am beyond Ego.

I am of the nature of the vast and all-full wisdom. I am one that is witness and beyond desire.

I reside in My glory alone. I am beyond motion. I am beyond old age.

I am beyond destruction. I am the vast ocean of bliss. I am the subtle.

I am beyond change. I am the soul, beyond the illusion of qualities. I am of the nature of the true wisdom beyond limit.

I am the state of excellent happiness. I am all-pervading and beyond stain.

I am the limitless and endless Sattva alone. I am replete with Supreme Bliss.

I am of the nature of happiness, which is Supreme Bliss.

I am pure, secondless, and eternal. I am devoid of beginning. I am free from the gross, subtle

and causal bodies.
I am of the nature of wisdom. I am the emancipated One.
I have a wondrous form. I am free from impurity. I am the one latent in all.
I am the refined Supreme Truth. I am of the nature of Wisdom- Bliss alone.
I am of the nature of consciousness. I am of the nature of happiness. I am the eternal Soul. I am the primeval consciousness.
I am beyond passion or faults.
I am neither existing nor non-existing.
I am not of the nature of anything. I am of the nature of the actionless.
I am beyond parts.
I am the pure, the enlightened, the eternal, the all-pervading and of the nature of the significance of Om, of the spotless, and of Chit.
I am Sacchidananda.

Even a mindful reading of the contemplative prompts can be very effective in gaining insight into your true nature.

The power of contemplative meditation cannot be overstated. If you stay situated in the sentiment of your true nature, you will find yourself increasingly unaffected by the worldly petty affairs. You won't feel hurt in relationships. Your outlook towards others will completely change. In any given circumstance, you will remind yourself that the true you is beyond the damage others' words or actions can cause. You start to realize that you are greater than the total of your labels, titles and emotions. You truly are, *Sacchidananda*.

uddhared ātmanātmānaṁnātmānam avasādayet,
ātmaiva hy ātmano bandhurātmaiva ripur ātmanaḥ.

bandhur ātmātmanas tasyayenātmaivātmanā jitaḥ,
anātmanas tu śatrutvevartetātmaiva śatru-vat.[29]

Mindfulness is the path to liberation. You are your own greatest friend and your own worst enemy. If you are mindful and your mind is under control, you are your friend whereas if your mind is unrestrained, you are your worst enemy.

Mindful Meditation

In ***Old Path,*** *White Clouds,* Thich Naht Hanh writes about Buddha's first practice of mindfulness that he discoursed to a group of children soon after his enlightenment. I hereby quote the passages below*:*

> Siddhartha [the Buddha] quietly gestured for the children to sit back up and he said, "You are all intelligent children and I am sure you will be able to understand and practice the things I will share with you. The Great Path I have discovered is deep and subtle, but anyone willing to apply his or her heart and mind can understand and follow it.
>
> "When your children peel a tangerine, you can eat it with awareness or without awareness. What does it mean to eat a tangerine in awareness? When you are eating the tangerine, you are aware that you are eating the tangerine. You fully experience its lovely fragrance and sweet taste. When you peel the tangerine, you know that you are peeling the tangerine; when you remove a slice and put it in your mouth, you know that you are removing a slice and putting it in your mouth; when you experience the lovely fragrance and sweet taste of the tangerine, you are aware that you are experiencing the lovely fragrance and sweet taste of the tangerine. The tangerine [that] Nandabala offered me had nine sections. I ate each morsel in awareness and saw how precious and wonderful it was. I did not forget the tangerine and thus the tangerine became something very real to me If the tangerine is real, the person eating it is real. That is what it means to eat a tangerine in awareness.
>
> …
>
> "Children, eating the tangerine in mindfulness means that while eating the tangerine you are truly in touch with it. Your mind is not chasing after thoughts of yesterday or tomorrow, but is dwelling fully in the present moment. The tangerine is truly present. Living in mindful awareness means to live in the present moment, your mind and body dwelling in the very here and now. "A person who practices mindfulness can see things in the tangerine that others are unable to see. An aware person can see the tangerine tree, the tangerine blossom in the spring, the sunlight and rain which nourished the tangerine. Looking deeply, one can see ten thousand things which have made the tangerine possible. Looking at a tangerine, a person who practices awareness can see all the wonders of the universe and how all things interact with one another. Children, our daily life is just like a tangerine. Just as a tangerine is comprised of sections, each day is comprised of twenty-four hours. One hour is like one section of tangerine. Living all twenty-four hours of a day is like eating all the sections of a tangerine. The path I have found is the path of living each hour of the day in awareness, mind and body always dwelling in the present moment. The opposite is to live in forgetfulness. If we live in forgetfulness, we do not know that we are alive. We do not fully experience life because our mind and body are not dwelling in the here and now."[30]

Mindful meditation is a simple, effective and practical way to bring your attention to the present moment. It is the way to live in the moment.

A woman said to a monk, “I love living in the moment. I really want to master it.”

“Great,” the monk replied enthusiastically, “you’ll learn exactly how to do that with mindful meditation.”

“It’s just that I don’t want to live in this particular moment,” she said wistfully. “I would rather live in another moment, like being on a cruise with my boyfriend.”

This is the fundamental issue with our minds. It’s eternally living in another moment, a moment we crave for and desire. In doing so, we completely miss the beauty and bliss of the present moment. The current moment is called ‘present’ for a reason, it’s a gift. A restless mind, however, is either dwelling in the past or dreaming about the future. The practice of mindful meditation brings you to the present moment, the moment of truth.

A disciple who had been practicing mindfulness for seven years approached his master and complained, “It’s been seven years that I’ve been meditating but I’m yet to gain any experience or insight. I don’t feel any better than what I was seven years ago.” “I see that your feet are wet,” the master spoke softly, “but your robe isn’t. I presume it’s raining outside and you carried an

umbrella with you.” “Yes.”

“It’s not the first time you came here while it rained or that you carried an umbrella, right?”

“Right?”

“It must be outside, your umbrella, right?”

A little miffed at his master he said, “What’s an umbrella got to do with my meditation?”

“Can you tell me if you put it on the right side of my door or the left?”

The disciple tried hard to recall but he couldn’t. He went back to the moment when he’d just arrived. *I remember taking my shoes off. I think I put my umbrella just behind the shoes on the right side. No, I think I put it on the left.* The disciple unsure of his answer went outside to check, the umbrella was neither on the left nor the right, it lay face down on the floor.

“I wonder what you have been doing in your mindful meditation all these years,” the master chastized him gently. “If you can’t even recall where you put your umbrella less than two minutes ago. Practice mindfulness in every act of

yours if you want the rewards of meditation."

It isn't far-fetched at all that a person would forget where he had put his umbrella in a matter of minutes. Countless times, you must have climbed steps at work or at home, or at a friend's place or at your favorite shrine. Yet, if I were to ask you the number of steps in any given flight of stairs, you are unlikely to have any recollection of it.

Why would you bother with the number of steps? It's junk information, you may think. It is. Now, here's the important thing: emotions and desires are un-abandoned thoughts if you recall. Since our mind is full of thoughts, we all remember the times when we were hurt, when we didn't get what we wanted, we remember the minutest details of undesirable incidents from years ago. When it comes to meditation, however, all those details, emotions and desires are merely thoughts. For some reason, we have given more importance to those thoughts over millions of others that have circled in our mind.

Mindfulness is about paying attention to every thought (for every action stems from a thought) without discriminating a good thought from a bad thought. When you will begin to watch every action of yours, as you become more mindful, a remarkable thing will happen to you: your mind will start downplaying depressing and hurtful thoughts of the past. Your reaction to anything thrown at you will become a mindful act rather than a knee-jerk response. This leads to a great sense of ease and calm, and you begin to feel more in control.

On a daily basis, we do so many things mindlessly, without paying attention to our thoughts, emotions, action and inaction. Mindful meditation is the art of doing everything with a sense of awareness and the only way to master this art is by way of practice.

Mindful meditation is one of the proven and tested ways to break your age-old habits, to shed your old tendencies. Awareness does that naturally, it transforms you into a calm, centered being. This is the easiest way of becoming superconscious of your own actions. With practice, as you transform most of your actions from instinctual to conscious acts, your intelligence gets sharpened because, unlike instinctual actions, performing any conscious act requires a degree of intelligence. The more you use it, the brighter it gets. Mindfulness makes you alert, attentive and watchful.

How to Do It Right

Mindful meditation does not require you to sit in a certain posture. You need not take deep breaths before you start it. On the contrary, it is a practice you have to inculcate in your everyday life, in every waking moment.

At the heart of the practice of mindful meditation is a simple question: what am I doing now?

This is *the* question you ask to draw yourself to the present moment. What are you doing right now? You are reading this book. Maybe you are reading the paperback version. Immediately you will notice the quality and color of the paper, the style and size of text, lighting in your room, your seat, everything around you and so on. Such awareness also helps you in retaining more information. As soon as you ask, “What am I doing right now?” you become aware, instantaneously. Its simplicity is what makes it effective. This is the secret of its potency. It is the difference between overseeing your actions versus overlooking them. You no longer remain ignorant about what you are doing.

To build on the practice of mindful meditation, you have to remember to ask yourself this question as many times as you can during the day. “What am I doing now?” – I’m brushing my teeth; Now, I am eating my breakfast; I’m drinking juice; I’m reading a newspaper; I am driving to work; I am checking my emails; I am in a meeting; I am working on a report; I am having my lunch, and so on and so forth. Your question and the answers to it, both are in the present continuous tense. In this manner you capture the essence of any moment as it’s passing.

Within a matter of weeks, you will find yourself calmer, sharper and more alert. You will slow down only to become a lot more efficient. You will eat less but you will gain more (not calories but nutrition) from each bite. Most people forget to chew their food, you won’t. As you become an adept at this meditation, you will get most of your work done without the slightest of stress. As you progress, not only do you become aware of your actions, you become increasingly aware of your emotions, feelings and thoughts.

At the beginning, you will keep forgetting to do this meditation. Perhaps during the whole day, you may only remember to ask this question thrice as opposed to the targeted thirty or three hundred times. You could set an alarm to remind you every hour, just a buzz or a soft beep. If you also practice concentrative meditation, you will excel at mindful meditation much faster. Predominantly because concentrative meditation makes you more alert and vigilant. You could go into the greatest depth at the minutest level in mindful meditation.

Next time you have trouble sleeping, ask yourself, what am I doing right now? Now, I'm sleeping. Your mind may feel restless and wander off to thoughts to keep you awake, ask yourself the question again and answer it again. Keep doing it each time your mind drifts away and before long, you will be fast asleep. This meditation is the easiest way to remove distractions. Practicing it also makes you better at other methods of meditation because you are able to filter out distractions.

If you choose to practice this meditation in a timed session of meditation, where you are sitting on your cushion and meditating, the question will change. Instead of saying what am I doing now, you have to ask: "Which thought is on my mind right now?" As soon as you will ask this question, you will experience a subtle thoughtless state for a few moments. It is a beautiful experience, addictive even. After a little while, your mind will wander off into its world of thoughts again. Repeat the question. It will come back to the present moment. Keep bringing your mind back to the present moment with the imperative question: "Which thought is on my mind right now?" Gradually, the duration of thoughtlessness will increase and you will become increasingly joyous and composed.

The mindful practice is a powerful way of staying in the present moment. And the present moment is always stress free.

It is complete in every sense of the word. Above all, the present moment is the only one we are actually in touch with. It's the only moment in which we can act or do anything to affect a change.

For those who have physical challenges with meditational postures, and those who are pressed for time, mindful meditation is the answer. Like all the other types, the more you practice correctly, the better you get at it. There are other variations of this meditation like watching the sensations you experience in your body (starting from toe to your head and back again), or being mindful of a certain music that may be playing. Similar to the story of Buddha eating tangerine, there's a famous tea ritual in Zen meditations, where you make, pour, and take every sip with utmost awareness. In Zen, there's also another form of meditation called *kinhin* or walking meditation. It's a type of mindful meditation where you take each step with complete awareness, feeling how your body weight shifts from one step to another. It's a remarkable way of building mindfulness in the simple act of walking that we take for granted.

While there are many flavours of mindful meditation, in this chapter, I have elucidated for you one of the most effective and primary methods of mindful

meditation. Let’s not lose the present moment for this is nature’s greatest ‘present’ that we are alive in this moment. This moment is the only guarantee of life. Put it to use, mindfully.

sarva-bhūta-stham ātmānaṁsarva-bhūtāni cātmani,
īkṣate yoga-yuktātmāsarvatra sama-darśanaḥ.[31]

Upon attainment of great insight, a true yogi realizes that the same divinity exists in everything and everyone. With his consciousness firmly yoked to supreme awareness, he sees every ounce of existence with equanimity and dispassion.

Observant Meditation

Once upon a time, some 2,500 years ago, there was a little girl agile as a monkey. She and her widower father would go around towns performing a difficult feat. The father would balance a 20 feet long bamboo pole on his forehead and the girl would climb up the pole in a heartbeat and stand on top of it on one foot. As soon as she would find her balance, the father would walk around with the girl poised steadily on top of the pole. Her father worried about his daughter's safety every time they did this act.

"I've told you a million times," he said to her, "that, you must keep an eye on me. I'm always watching you so I may balance the pole. You should watch me as well so we may avoid any accident. You are all I have, little one."

"No, father, no," she protested, "during the performance, you have to focus on your part and I'll take care of mine. We must not distract ourselves by watching each other. Let's both stay very stable, very alert and I'll concentrate on what I must do. This is the only way we are going to pull off this feat every time."

The father remained unconvinced so they approached Buddha. It didn't take long for Buddha to conclude that the little girl was right. "If you learn to watch yourself," Buddha declared, "there's nothing and no one left to gaze at."

In line with the six principles of meditation (no recollection, calculation, imagination, examination, construction and digression), observant meditation is about watching your thoughts in the most dispassionate manner possible.

Observant meditation is particularly useful to pacify your mind. Most other meditations I've detailed so far can usually only be done when your mind is at peace. It's hard to concentrate or be mindful when you are angry. Observant meditation on the other hand can be done when your mind is agitated or you are stressed. It helps you in calming down.

Unlike other meditations, it does not directly improve your concentration or memory. It does not increase the power of your thought either, but with the calmness that it brings, you may end up being more productive at home and at work.

This meditation is also called witness meditation for you are simply playing the role of a witness while you meditate. The soul of this meditation is to simply watch your thoughts as if you are watching a movie on a screen, as if whatever comes to your mind is not something that happened to you but to a third person. You realize that when an actor dies on screen, he or she isn't truly dead. In the same manner, you realize that all thoughts are empty, they are devoid of any true essence, and that you don't have to react to those thoughts.

Due to our ego, we strongly identify ourselves with our bodies and individual existence. It makes us take things personally. If someone calls you an idiot, it's hard to be mindful in that time or simply act as a witness thinking," I'm the soul, I'm divine, and this person is not saying it to me." On the contrary, you may feel like giving it back right then thinking, "How dare he say that to me!" You may end up calling him names.

Observant meditation allows you to downplay the role of individual ego. It helps you in putting your ego on the backburner and see yourself as a third person. You'll be amazed how quickly your reactions will change. I'm not suggesting that you shouldn't defend yourself. But for your own peace of mind, you may choose to respond differently, gently, even gracefully to being called an idiot.

A disciple said to his master, "You say ego is bad, but it's not possible to live without ego, otherwise the world will crush us."

"Perhaps."

"So, how much ego am I allowed to have?" he asked.

"Just enough so you don't step in front of a moving bus," the master replied mindfully sipping his tea.

This is the underlying principle of being a witness while operating in this world that can be very difficult at times: watch yourself and that is it.

All thoughts – good or bad, right or wrong, moral or immoral, loving or hateful – are just thoughts. Your emotions and desires stem from these thoughts. You start observing your thoughts and they begin to disappear like one sound of a clap disperses all birds on the tree. Once you start watching your thoughts, they all evaporate, leaving you calm and blissful.

How to Do It Right

1. Sit in any comfortable posture. The standard posture of meditation is even more useful as channelizing the energies while your mind is empty is extremely helpful in swiftly moving towards a state of complete tranquility of the mind.
2. Take a few deep breaths.
3. Remind yourself that you are simply playing the role of an observer, a passive spectator who doesn't cheer or jeer.
4. You can close your eyes and wait for your thoughts to emerge, or you can open your eyes and fix your gaze at any object, close or distant.
5. Simply watch your thoughts as they come.

Now wait for the thoughts to come and knock on the door of your consciousness. The first thing you'll notice is that that the flow of thoughts is immediately checked when you sit there anticipating their arrival. If you maintain the lucidity of your passivity (which means, be a good witness), you will be able to observe your thoughts lot more clearly.

Let any thought come, of any nature, just don't entertain it. Just let it come and let it go, repeatedly. Don't analyze them, don't pursue them, don't reject them – just don't react. They are like billboards and banners you see on the road while you are driving, just don't pay attention as they are not important to your journey.

Intrinsically, these thoughts are immaterial and barren. One by one they will come incessantly, let them. When you no longer react to your thoughts with this meditation, a strange thing starts to happen. The gap between one thought and the next increases.

That gap is a type of quietude, a variety of mental stillness that's priceless. Immerse in it by being aware of such quietude.

But if you have been practicing concentrative meditation with great sincerity, you will master this one in no time.

Witness meditation helps you become more mindful and is particularly good to overcome restlessness fueled by passions and emotions. I have intentionally separated it from the mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is a sharper form of awareness; it is an active state.

If you have ever been on a Ferris wheel then you know the feeling when your basket goes up. You see a different view of the city. A tickling feeling courses through your body when you go down. Everyone is helpless – some scream, some laugh, some are more quiet, some are scared, some are trying not to throw

up, some hold onto the handle tightly and so on.

The moment you step out and sit on the side, you see all these people in various baskets of the Ferris wheel. It looks funny that they are screaming and shouting in joy. You see the same baskets going round and round. One large swing and everything is just going around. But when you step outside, step aside, you don't feel the same emotions. You become a bystander. You see how this is just a swing where riders are literally going around in circles.

Observant meditation is stepping aside. Rather than being in the Ferris wheel of your mind, you step outside and you observe it as a third party. You realize that all those rounds of emotions, passions, feelings, thoughts, desires and all that anxiety and excitement you'd felt at various times was only because you were riding the swing.

It's a defining moment in the life of any meditator – the moment when you step out of your own mind, your own ego, your body and see the world for what it is, transient and illusory. You come to understand that you have other choices available than being on the ride. After all, no matter how exhilarating a ride, it gets tiring after a while.

Witness meditation rejuvenates you and makes you more mindful of your choices. You get to decide whether you to want to ride or just watch. You get to hop on and hop off the wheel at will (hopefully, you won't do that when the wheel is moving. Meditate to stop it). This is the power of witness meditation.

Dance, when you're broken open.
Dance, if you've torn the bandage off.
Dance in the middle of the fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance, when you're perfectly free.[32]

Spirited Meditation

There was a time, only a couple of hundred years ago, when most people engaged in hard physical labor during the course of their daily lives. Everything required physical effort, from cooking a simple meal to procuring its ingredients. People would walk miles for simple things like fetching water, sourcing firewood, ploughing their fields and turning barren fields into fertile land. Blacksmiths, tailors, porters, cart-pullers, everyone had to do some manual work to earn their living. Shepherds would rear their cattle. The very act of living was a physically intensive, often a back breaking task.

Today, however, we have cars with automatic transmission and cruise control, even changing gears or stepping on gas seems like work. We barely perspire in climate-controlled indoor environments from our homes to shopping malls. We have dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, washing machines and tumble dryers. We turn on a tap and water comes swishing through. We turn on a knob and there's fire for cooking. This has led to a precarious situation: we have excess of physical energy in us and we don't know how and where to channelize it. The advent of television hasn't helped either. There's only so many calories you can burn in the gym or in clicking the TV remote.

It's no rocket science that when we consume food, we produce energy. When we rest, we preserve energy. Our lifestyle today is driven by mental work (as opposed to physical). Unable to burn the energy our body stores, we experience chronic lethargy and sluggishness, a lack of freshness. As a result of which, more and more of us are restless. We try to keep our minds engaged so we may forget about this energy brimming in us. Thanks to video games, phones and social media, young adults today are busy staring at screens, which makes them only more restless, agitated and angry.

It's like a mouse is trapped in a carton, let's say a box of cake, and it's trying to free itself, to find an opening when there is none. All you hear is commotion in the carton.

Mental activities can't substitute the physical ones. Meditation is not a substitute for exercising. The physical fitness we gain from exercising can't be

replaced by the peace we experience in meditation. The yogis of the yore ate frugally because they knew their training demanded spending more time in meditation. Even during my days of intense practice, I never ate twice in one day, only one frugal meal in 24 hours. Other than that, I sometimes would drink a bit of water from my water-pot in between my meditation sessions (there were only one or two breaks in 24 hours).

Spirited meditation, also known as active meditation, is based on the premise that if I could devise a system of meditation, which, while keeping the virtues intact, allowed me to get rid of the excess physical energy in my body. I refrain from calling it active meditation because it may imply that the other five systems of meditation are passive and inert. Clearly, that's not the case.

The fundamental difference between spirited and other forms of meditation is the use of physical energy. In this meditation, rather than sitting still in one posture, you do the opposite – you dance.

Even true yoga asana are done with great mindfulness and they burn your physical energy. Spirited meditation however is not about stretching your limbs and staying in that posture for a little while. It is about getting the physical energy out of your system. You may think it's like playing sports then. Well, it isn't. In sports, there are many emotions that come into play. You may feel down on losing a game, you may have to sit and wait for a while, you may envy your partner playing better than you or a spurt of ego upon winning. What the other player does is not in your control.

The closest to spirited meditation would be dancing with one fundamental difference – in dance you are focusing on the rhythm and perhaps the music. In meditation, you are entirely focused on a sense of mindfulness, on your breathing, on surrender.

Roughly 800 years ago, Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi, a great Sufi saint, deeply influenced by the Turkish culture and customs, started a unique ritual called the *Sema* ritual. Later it came to be known as The Order of the Whirling Dervishes. In this carefully crafted and choreographed ritual, a few dervishes dressed in a certain way would dance in the love of God.

During the *Sema* ritual, *semazen* or the whirling dervishes, dance in great synchronization, as if in perfect harmony. There are four distinct musical shifts, each one with a different tempo and rhythm. The first stage is to testify God's existence, the second is devoted to unity, the third stage is about his majesty and the fourth about God's power.

The Whirling Dervishes of Rumi states:

> In the symbolism of the Sema ritual, the semazen's camel's hair hat (*sikke*) represents the tombstone of the ego; his wide, white skirt represents the ego's shroud. By removing his black cloak, he is spiritually reborn to the truth. At the beginning of the Sema, by holding his arms crosswise, the semazen appears to represent the number one, thus testifying to God's unity. While whirling, his arms are open: his right arm is directed to the sky, ready to receive God's beneficence; his left hand, upon which his eyes are fastened, is turned toward the earth. The semazen conveys God's spiritual gift to those who are witnessing the Sema. Revolving from right to left around the heart, the semazen embraces all humanity with love. The human being has been created with love in order to love. Mevlâna Jalâluddîn Rumi says, "All loves are a bridge to Divine love. Yet, those who have not had a taste of it do not know!"[33]

Three hundred years after Rumi, came another saint in India. Immersed in the divine love of Krishna, he started the mass movement of *Kirtana*. Known as Caitanya Mahaprabhu, he was the orginal founder of the Bhakti movement. Romaing through the streets and villages, he would mesmerize thousands of people where he would go. Dancing in complete ecstasy to the holy names of Krishna, a rhythmic chant of the Hare Krishna *mahamantra* was done.

Taken from an Upanishad, Mahaprabhu reversed the mantra to make it one of the most famous mantras of *kirtana* in the world today. It was further made popular by Srila Prabhupada known for spreading the bhakti movement in the West under the aegis of International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or ISKCON as it's more commonly known. Mahaprabhu mantra was:

> *Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare,*
> *Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare.*

Devotees and non-believers would feel helpless in front of his enigmatic voice, his graceful limbs, and the mind-numbing beats of *mridanga*, beautiful sound of harmonium, along with cymbals. Before anyone could gather their senses, they would find themselves jumping high up in the air in extreme ecstasy.

The whole environment would get spiritually charged. A wave of calmness and devotion would wash over all the participants as they would feel alive and in union with the divine.

The Russian philosopher and mystic, G. I. Gurdjieff, had also introduced a form of spirited meditation called the Gurdjieff Stop meditation. The participants were asked to stop whatever activity they were doing the moment Gurdjieff would announce "stop". Stopping the moment after any rigorous activity brings about a great sense of awareness. Osho, a 20th century Indian mystic, introduced the Gurdjieff method in his active meditation and gave it the name of dynamic meditation.

My goal here is to strip all mumbo jumbo and present to you the most

ancient, basic, and reliable form of spirited meditation.

The use of music is prevalent in almost all the religions of the world, whether that be in the form of *kirtana*, a *qawwali*, a gospel or any other. When you use any form of music to enter into a meditative state, it's called *bhava samadhi*, a tranquility of the purest sentiment devoid of any negativity. I often slip into it during *kirtana* in the ashram, the ecstasy one experiences during this state is unworldly.

Spirited meditation is not about losing your consciousness and falling flat on the floor in a daze, in ecstasy. Instead, it is about rising above your body consciousness, it is about providing an outlet to your physical energies resulting in a complete and total harmony of your body and mind.

How to Do It Right

In order to do spirited meditation correctly, you will need a piece of music, any genre, that starts out slow, builds to a crescendo and then flows gently, slowly like a river murmuring in autumn. You can take three different pieces of music and combine them, make a playlist of your choice, or simply pick anything that fulfills the criteria above and play it. There are four primary stages roughly spanning 10-15 minutes each.

1. The build-up stage: In this stage, the music is playing slowly and you build up the energy by being aware of your breath and your movements. You can recall past incidents, negative emotions, or joyous moments, anything you like during the first stage.
2. The release stage: The second stage is about dancing hard and wild (without hurting yourself or others if you are in a group) so you may release the built-up of stored energy.
3. The let-go stage: Once you gently sway to the slow music and you completely let go off all that you've just released. You forgive, you surrender, you let go. With each gentle movement, with each sway, you experience the lightness of being, slowly aligning yourself with your energies. You remain in that state even after the meditation has ended. One of the important things in the third stage is to play a different music than the first stage even though both are slow-tempo pieces of music. In the first stage you are aware of your breathing, your thoughts and emotions. In this stage, however, you are just being present in the present

moment. You are just enjoying ‘being’.

4. The rest stage: In the fourth stage, lie down on the floor in *shava-asana*, the corpse pose to internalize what all you have just done, experienced and assimilated. There’s no music in the fourth stage. You just listen to your own breathing – inhalation, exhalation, inhalation, exhalation.

Follow the steps below to begin the spirited meditation:

1. Loosen your body by gently shaking your limbs.
2. Breathe deep a few times to normalize your breath.
3. Turn on the music and start dancing to its rhythm.
4. Start by gently swinging and swaying to the music. This is the first stage. Pay attention to your breath. You may not be able to hear your breath since there’s music playing in the background, and that’s fine. Just be aware of your inhalation and exhalation as you dance to the slow rhythm.
5. In stage two, as the music builds up, follow your heart’s voice (or your body’s movements) and simply just dance. Dance away all that’s stored in you and causing you any grief at all. Release the energy inside you.
6. Slow down again to a different piece of music in the third stage. Just flow. Follow the six principles of meditation. You are just dancing and flowing with the melody, rhythm and notes of your music.
7. When the music stops, in the fourth stage, simply lie down on your back. Just rest and watch your breath and it’ll harmonize your energies.

Spirited meditation is a wonderful way of releasing the pent up energy and even excess calories in the most meditative way possible. It is a great way of introducing meditation to youngsters. Even as adults, some days when you feel restless or too full of energy, when you just can’t sit down and meditate, you could do this meditation instead. A wave of joy will wash over you making you feel light both physically and mentally.

No matter the nature of your meditation, walking the path of meditation requires certain virtues a meditator must acquire. Righteous living makes meditation a whole lot easier. For, when we lead a virtuous life, our mind slows down on its own. A noble conduct and a pure heart burns restlessness and negativity in no time, like fire would burn a cottonball.

Virtues of a Good Meditator

- ✧ Compassion
- ✧ Truthfulness
- ✧ Gratitude
- ✧ Empathy
- ✧ Humility
- ✧ Faith

buddhyavisuddhayayuktodhrtyatmanamniyamya ca,
sabdadinvisayamstyaktvaraga-dvesauvyudasya ca.

vivikta-sevilaghv-asiyata-vak-kaya-manasah,
dhyana-yoga-paronityamvairagyamsamupasritah.

ahankarambalamdarpamkamamkrodhamparigraham,
vimucyanirmamahsantobrahma-bhuyayakalpate.[34]

The one who leads a life of self-discipline, ever patiently purifying himself, leading a life of detachment and love, the one who interacts less, speaks little and is mindful of his actions and speech, the one who lets go of his false ego, pompousness, lust, anger, the one who doesn't horde for personal gains, such a person lives in trance and is most certainly self-realized.

The Mother of Meditation

A seeker approached a master to learn meditation from him. “There’s one condition,” the master said. “You are allowed to speak only four words every time you cross a milestone on the path.”

“I can do that.”

“Each milestone may take six years.”

The seeker swallowed and confirmed that the master indeed said six years and not six weeks or months.

“Yes, six years.”

He agreed to follow the instructions and began his meditation in the monastery.

At the first chance of speaking after six long years, the first four words he uttered in front of his master were, “Bed is too hard.”

The master said nothing. Another stretch of six years ensued, at the end of which the disciple unable to contain his annoyance said, “Food is always cold.” Once again the master did not reply. Another six years later, the disciple said, “I am leaving you!” “Yes, be gone,” the master said. “All I’ve seen you do in the last 18 years is complain, complain and complain.”

One would think that if the disciple had just one chance of speaking to his master after so long, the four words could or would have had some veneration, reverence or gratitude for his master. It may also seem a little too harsh on the part of his master to act in the manner he did. But the truth is that the master knew something which most of us remain unaware of: a talkative mind. In all probability, that’s all the disciple contemplated on for 18 years – he thought about what wasn’t right. Rather than understanding the essence of meditation, he complained in his mind for eighteen long years.

The goal of meditation is not to sit stiff and become a lifeless serious yogi who fails to smile in the happiness of others or cry in their pain. It is to become an embodiment of love and peace. Love and peace don’t germinate in a compassionless or loveless heart, they don’t cultivate in a mind that is not ready.

There's a reason why Patanjali put *yama* (moral injunctions) and *niyama* (fixed observances) long before meditation. He states in the *Yoga Sutras*:

> *ahimsa satyaasteyabrahmacaryaaparigrahahyamah.*[35]
>
> Non-violence, truth, abstention from stealing, continence, and absence of greed for possessions beyond one's need are the five pillars of *yama*.

Regarding fixed observances, he says:

> *Saucasantosatapahsvadhyayaisvarapranidhananiniyamah.*
>
> Cleanliness, contentment, religious zeal, self-study and surrender of the self to the supreme Self or God are the *niyamas.*[36]

The path of yoga, according to Patanjali, starts with practising restraint and discipline. There's a good reason for that. To begin with, a virtuous life leads to a calm mind, and it's much easier to meditate with a calm mind. That's not all, though.

The sages of the yore realized tens of thousands of years ago that not everyone who sought bliss needed to meditate. Many realized the same state by serving the mankind, or by doing devotional service, or even by leading a simple and meaningful life. Meditation is the means to an end. It is designed to lead you towards a calmer and even state. Such quietude doesn't mean you become cold and indifferent and only focus on your practice of meditation. On the contrary, it helps you to feel the pain of others so you may share their grief, their sorrows. For meditation to truly work, a serious mediator ought to imbibe certain qualities. For, a virtuous life is the mother of meditation.

What do you think, O monks: if a boy from his earliest childhood develops kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, or equanimity, will he then still do bad deeds?

"No, Venerable One."

But, if he no longer does bad deeds, will suffering then still attack him?

"Certainly not, Venerable One. How should anyone, without doing bad deeds, be still attacked by suffering!"

Kindness... compassion... altruistic joy... equanimity should be developed, by men as well as by women. No man or woman, on departing this life, can retain this body. The mortal has mind as mediator. The monk, however, knows: "Whatever formerly I have done of bad deeds with this material body, all that I have still to atone for here, and nothing of it will follow me." So developed, the liberation of the heart by kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity leads to never-return, unless the wise monk already during life penetrates to a higher deliverance.[37]

Compassion

A **young man was mugged**, beaten and left for dead on a street. As he lay there bruised, wounded and unconscious, a man passing by, who happened to be a psychiatrist, rushed to the victim. “My goodness,” he exclaimed, “whoever did this really needs help!”

The victim needs assistance and the culprit compassion, either way, they both need help. If the victim is not offered help, he may die and if the culprit is not extended help, he may kill someone else. At any rate, it’s a loss to our world.

Of all the virtues any human being can ever possess, compassion by far is the most important one. It is the seed of goodness. For compassion is love, it is forgiveness, it is at once divine. A path, no matter how good is its system of meditation or how erudite are its scriptures, that does not encourage and inspire you to be compassionate is not worth treading.

When I use the word compassion, I mean it in absolute sense which means that you show it to everyone to the best of your abilities. When we are compassionate or forgiving only sometimes, it means that we are doing so at our convenience, it means we still think that there’s a choice more reasonable than compassion. True compassion is not based on the cause or the action, it is simply a virtue, a response, an emotion, a feeling that we choose over any other.

The lives of the greatest sages have been full of compassion but one thing that stands out throughout the New Testament is the innocence and compassion of Jesus Christ, the messiah who became God’s lamb as he paid the price of compassion with his own life.

> Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again, but they kept shouting, “Crucify! Crucify Him!”
>
> A third time he said to them, “Why? What has this man done wrong? I have found in Him no grounds for the death penalty.
>
> Therefore, I will have Him whipped and then release Him.”
>
> But they kept up the pressure, demanding with loud voices that He be crucified. And their voices won out. So Pilate decided to grant their demand and released the one they were asking for, who had been thrown into prison for rebellion and murder. But he handed Jesus over to their will.

(Luke 23: 20–25)

> Two other criminals were also led away to be executed with Him. When as they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified Him there, along with the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided His clothes and cast lots.
>
> The people stood watching, and even the leaders kept scoffing: “He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked Him.
>
> (Luke 23: 32–36)

“Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.” This was what Jesus of Nazareth said in response to the excruciating and fatal pain he was inflicted. This was his reply to the injustice done to him. And, what happened next? “And they divided His clothes and cast lots.”

There, in the same picture, you have the two extremes of our world. On the one hand is the compassion of Christ demonstrating there’s no limit to how high you can rise above what you are subjected to, and on the other hand is the greed, ignorance and cruelty of the soldiers showing there’s no end to how low one can stoop.

Compassion is unreasonable – it is beyond reason.

Throughout the history of our race, good people have been ridiculed and mocked – they have been jeered at and spat at, they have been unjustly punished, beaten and even killed. Someone once asked me what purpose did it solve, such sacrifice.

“Well,” I said, “because Christ sacrificed his life, more than a billion people lead a life of inspiration today, even 2,000 years later. Because Buddha sacrificed his kingdom, more than 500 million derive the benefit even today.”

Compassion and forgiveness are simply synonyms of sacrifice. When you forgive, somewhere you sacrifice a part of your own existence, your respect, your dignity, yourself. However, by forgiving you also go beyond the shackles of ego. Moreover, sacrificing is not a trade, you don’t expect anything for yourself in return, it is philanthropy, it’s an act of charity.

Ask me not what if the other person doesn’t deserve your compassion or what if they don’t acknowledge it. Because if you still have these questions, you’ve not let the Passion of Christ sink into your heart.

Upanishads have a term for our world – *Vashudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the whole world is one single family. It’s one planet, one world, one family.

Compassion does not require a reason or reward, only a desire, a discipline. Forgiveness doesn’t even need discipline but only a big heart, big enough to

absorb their mistakes. When your heart is as big as the ocean, their shark-like mistakes and tuna- like presence in your life will coexist without so much as causing a ripple in your mind.

When you choose compassion over any other choice, you naturally elevate your consciousness. When you sit down to meditate, after a random act of kindness or a show of compassion, you will discover that your mind is naturally quieter than usual. It starts to gravitate towards its natural state. This peace is already present in your heart like fragrance in rose.

anudvega-karaṁ vākyaṁsatyaṁ priya-hitaṁ ca yat,
svādhyāyābhyasanaṁ caivavāṅ-mayaṁ tapa ucyate.[38]

To speak true words that are endearing, gentle and motivating, to be mindful of your words, is penance of the speech.

Truthfulness

The great saint Kabir was a weaver who lived in Varanasi some 550 years ago. He was known for his frugal, simple and truthful conduct. He was spinning yarn once when a stranger barged into his home and fell at his feet.

“Please help me, I didn’t mean to steal” he said in a rushed voice. “I needed food for my family. I deeply regret it. The king’s men are after me. They’ll be here any moment…help me.”

Kabir looked calmly at the stranger’s eyes full of fright and paranoia. He was sweating, fear and anxiety was written all over him.

“Hide in that heap of cotton, quickly now.” Kabir pointed at a mound of cotton no more than a few feet away from where he sat. The thief did as told and Kabir resumed murmuring his famous couplets while spinning the wheel.

> *Jako rake saanyiyan maar sake na koye Baal na baanka kar sake jo jag bairi hoye…*
>
> Who can harm the one who’s got the protection of God, Even if the whole world turns against him, they can’t even make dent a strand of his hair.
>
> *Saanch barabar tap nahin jhooth barabar paap Jaake hriday saanch hai, taak hriday prabhu aap.*
>
> There’s no penance greater than truth and no sin worse than lying, God lives in the one who has truth in his heart.

“Have you seen him?” the king’s men shouted, holding naked swords, as they interrupted Kabir’s recital and work.

“Who?” Kabir said in a matter of fact tone without stopping his spinning.

“A thief just ran in this direction,” the sergeant said. “Do you know where he went?”

Kabir chuckled, continued weaving and said, “He’s hiding in that little hillock of cotton.” And he carried on singing the couplets.

The soldiers exchanged glances among themselves. Dismissing him as a madman, the men went away in search of the thief. After about five minutes, Kabir asked the thief to come out of hiding.

“Are you crazy,” the thief said. “You nearly had me killed!

Why did you tell the truth?”

“Because, my friend,” Kabir said stopping his wheel, “only truth could save you. Truth knows no fear whereas the king’s men would have seen through my lies.”

The thief went away transformed and legend has it that he became an ardent follower of Kabir.

In this day and age, it is not easy to be truthful. It has never been easy because truth is mostly punished. Most people don’t even want to hear the truth, they are happy living in a cocoon of lies. Sometimes, there’s no way of sugarcoating the truth. Especially in a situation where the other person doesn’t want to handle the truth, it doesn’t matter how gently you tell them, they will react unfavorably. This is the single most reason why most people tell lies countless times every day. It’s easier to get away with a lie than handle truth.

Someone calls you and you don’t take their call because you don’t feel like it. When you call back that person, you can’t say, “I didn’t want to speak to you.” You lie saying that you were either busy or the phone was on silent mode and so on. The other person knows too that you are most probably telling a lie but they don’t want to hear the truth either. Truth would hurt them more.

In walking the path of meditation, however, liberation comes from the strength that only truth can bestow. It’s a virtue unlike any other. On January 1, 2011, I vowed to never tell a lie again. It’s been one of the most rewarding and most difficult vows because most people around you don’t want to hear the truth, and you can’t always speak the truth because it hurts them. Sometimes, you have to choose whether you want to speak the truth and hurt the other person or wish to keep quiet and bear the brunt.

Between truth and compassion, I personally choose compassion.

That is not to say that I would tell a lie but I would rather hurt myself than hurt the other person. You may think it’s unusual but if you reflect on even your own life, you would find innumerable instances where you chose to hurt yourself out of compassion rather than hurting the other person. It’s not uncommon. Most of us do it. When you make a commitment to lead a virtuous life, you see yourself doing it more often. Putting the other person before yourself, that’s what compassion is. Truth on the other hand is putting your principle before the other person. Sometimes that is more important.

I once read a quote that said, “Some people are so brutally honest that it

almost seems they enjoy more being brutal than being truthful." Being truthful doesn't mean that you have to be brutal. Buddha was known for speaking the truth. He put forward six profound conditions that should be evaluated to determine the right time of breaking the truth to someone assuming it should be spoken at all.

Once, Prince Abhaya asked Buddha if he ever spoke harsh and disagreeable words. At first, Buddha said there was no categorical yes or no answer. However, when pressed by Abhaya, the Venerable One, referring to himself in third person as *Tathagata* (the one gone beyond) spoke:

> In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be un-factual, untrue, unbeneficial (or: not connected with the goal), un- endearing and disagreeable to others, he does not say them.
>
> In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, un-endearing and disagreeable to others, he does not say them.
>
> In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, but un-endearing and disagreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them.
>
> In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be un- factual, untrue, unbeneficial, but endearing and agreeable to others, he does not say them.
>
> In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, unbeneficial, but endearing and agreeable to others, he does not say them.
>
> In the case of words that the Tathagata knows to be factual, true, beneficial, and endearing and agreeable to others, he has a sense of the proper time for saying them. Why is that? Because the Tathagata has compassion for living beings.[39]

It's hard to find a better and clearer teaching on truth. If our words are true, factual, beneficial but not endearing or agreeable, we should think a million times before stating such truth as it's unlikely to accomplish anything at all. It'll hurt the other person and won't benefit them in any way.

Imagine you are a coach and your student is about to run the 100-meter sprint in Olympics. Just when the shot is fired, you start telling your student the truth about how good she is and how you are certain she'll win and so on. Those words may be true, factual, beneficial, endearing and agreeable but it's not the right time. It'll distract her, and keep her from winning the race. Sometimes, you have to tell the truth even if it's not endearing and agreeable (which is often the case). Even at that time, one must consider the time and place. Your child accompanies you to a birthday party where you see some other kid who scored really well in his exams. If you start lecturing your child in that moment, asking him to take inspiration from this other person, it would fall on deaf ears and do more damage than good.

In that context, truth is not absolute. The nature of truth changes according to

circumstances and time. You draw three lines *a*, *b*, and *c*. The line *a* is the tallest one, it's the truth. Someone comes along and draws a fourth line, *d*, making it even taller than *a*. A statement that was perfectly correct and true before *d* was drawn is no longer true or factual. The point I'm arriving at is that it's pivotal to examine the nature of your truth you are about to state. If it's just a matter of opinion, you may want to hold on until you are absolutely certain that what you are stating is a fact and not your interpretation of a fact.

When Jesus was asked if he was the king of the Jews, he could have negated and his life would have been spared, but he chose to speak the truth. Next only to compassion, truth is the most potent quality of a true saint, a noble human being. Next time you are tempted to tell a lie, just pause for a moment, reflect on it and choose your words carefully. It'll go a long way in ensuring that your speech, thoughts and actions are in harmony.

All said and done, truth in speech, thoughts and conduct is the most potent way to flood yourself with immense inner strength. Meditation will become a child's play then. For a truthful person is always calmer and less distracted. When you lead a life of truth, you have very little to be afraid of. It is also the most expensive virtue because the world does not take too kindly when they are told the truth.

na mokṣasyākāṅkṣā bhavavibhavavāñchāpi ca na me,
na vijñānāpekṣā śaśimukhi sukhecchāpi na punaḥ,
atastvāṃ saṃyāce janani jananaṃ yātu mama vai,
mṛḍānī rudrāṇī śiva śiva bhavānīti japataḥ.[40]

I don't seek liberation, O Mother Goddess, nor do I want the riches of the world or a knowledge of special sciences. I'm just grateful to be your child and just wish that in every lifetime I should seek your refuge. Even when I give up this body, I should have your holy names on my lips.

Gratitude

The singular most powerful emotion to set everything right in one's life, no matter what the circumstances maybe, is gratitude. The practice of gratitude helps you to focus on the light in your life rather than worrying about the darkness.

Some eight years ago, before I renounced, there was a cold wave in North India. Several incidents of homeless people dying from the cold were reported. My father asked and inspired me to do my two cents worth. Consequently, a senior manager in my company, who was also a close friend of mine, and I decided to distribute blankets to the needy. We did not want to just give them away to some organization. Instead, we wanted to ensure that they directly went to the hands of those in need. We bought about fifteen dozen blankets. We had an SUV that could stock more than 70 blankets at a time. My friend, his sister, our driver and I got in the vehicle at midnight. We started driving around the high streets of a major city, an industrial town.

The outside temperature was a chilly three degrees centigrade.

The street lights had a thick foggy halo around them. The roads were deserted, even the stray dogs and the cows were in hiding. It was all painfully quiet and cold. As we drove around, we saw there were homeless people lying on the footpaths at different places. Some had wrapped themselves in jute bags, some in flattened cardboard boxes, quite a few were draped in newspapers. Among these were the aged, the young, men and women, children, toddlers and infants. Not even one person was sleeping with their legs fully stretched, all were lying curled up to conserve body heat. In the car the heating was on, we felt guilty for enjoying this little luxury. I had seen things like that earlier, it was the first time however that I paid close attention.

We stepped out of the car and woke some people up to give them new blankets. Some were ecstatic, some cried, some thought we were the police who came to remove them from sleeping at a public place, some thought it was a joke. A few were drunk and could not get up, some wanted more than one blanket. No one asked us for money or other things. They seemed very contented

to get a blanket.

Their clothes were soiled and tattered, their hair unruly and mostly matted, their bodies dark and smudged in dirt, years of suffering and sweat had permanently settled on their bodies, but, their eyes had an expression of peace and acceptance. Further, they all bore smiles of gratitude and contentment as they got their blankets. Some immediately unwrapped the blanket and donned it. It was gratifying beyond words to see them do so. Some made it their pillow; they either did not want to use it right away because it was new or perhaps intended to sell it in the grey market the following day. That was beside the point. We did our karma, we thought.

There was one particular scene beyond bear. Some people came running towards our car as they saw from a distance that we were giving blankets. In that group was a girl, she was physically handicapped. She tried to rush like the rest fearing the car might leave or we might run out of blankets. While she was trying to run, she stumbled and fell down. We almost cried seeing her state. As she got up and came closer, we realized she was mentally challenged as well. We could not endure the scene. We did our part and quickly got going. I never went out again to distribute blankets. I did not have the heart to see such suffering. My friend and his sister gave away the remaining on another night.

We came home and as I lay my head on the pillow, snuggled up in my quilt, I was looking up at the roof. My room was furnished, it was heated and had an attached washroom – everything to make it comfortable. It all seemed like a dream. “Wow! I have a roof over my head,” I thought. “What good karma must have I done to deserve this.” Those people kept flashing in front of my eyes. I could not help but wonder that not having a roof over your head was one thing but what about all the other needs? Where did they go to attend the nature’s call? They had no place to cook, nowhere to store their utensils or stove, no place to even keep the blankets in fact, they had no place to wash their clothes. Where would they generally go to get drinking water? Did they brush their teeth, or could they even afford to do that? They had no place called home. There was no where they could go after a tiring day. These and a million other questions boggled and tired my mind out.

I thought about how little we need to be grateful. I thought about how gratitude is not dependent on the magnitude of materiality, it is not dependent on what all you must have. Gratitude is simply a state of mind, an expression of the heart, a commitment to tolerance, a resolution to be happy, a feeling of peace, a sense of contentment, an emotion of fulfilment.

If you believe that in order to be grateful you must have certain things in your life, you will always find it hard to be thankful, because no matter how much you may have, there will still be just as much more you will want to have. Work towards what gives you joy but be grateful for all that you have.

When you are grateful, an invisible blanket of peace covers you, it makes you glow, it makes you happy, strong, warm. Gratitude puts mind at ease about everything around. Gratitude is not about just about being thankful to God.

Here are the two types of gratitude:

Being Grateful to God

Some people are grateful to God, to the Supreme Soul, to someone they feel is up there. It can give them a huge psychological boost, help them survive difficult phases in life, give them the motivation to stay course among numerous other benefits. Those who believe in the existence of God, regardless of the religion they follow, have someone they can be grateful to. Even daily prayer is a form of gratitude. Being grateful to God is not complete gratitude, though. Imagine being thankful to the mother who is never careless, indifferent or irresponsible towards her children. It is of little use. Far more important than being grateful to God is to be grateful to his children, his creation. This leads to the gratitude of the second type.

Being Grateful to Others

Love and gratitude are soulmates; happiness and harmony are their offspring. It is not possible to be grateful unless you accept that someone has done something for you. If you feel, out of ego or ignorance, that it was your right, you will fail to feel grateful. Consequently, you will not experience any happiness, much less peace and bliss. Any relationship with gratitude present in it is bound to flourish. Gratitude is not always about grand gestures, it may range from a sincere thank you to an act of extraordinary compassion.

The important thing to remember is that you must consciously express your gratitude without any expectations for reciprocation; it is hard but doable. True gratitude makes one generous, compassionate and infinitely loving.

Practice of gratitude lends incredible emotional strength. If you are emotionally strong, you can succeed at anything, anything at all. Gratitude makes you emotionally pure and such purity in turn allows you to love

unconditionally.

Absence of anything dictates the value of its presence.

When we express gratitude, when we feel it in our hearts, it helps us value what all we have in our lives. And that is a divine start to a good life.

yomāṁ paśyatisarvatrasarvaṁ ca mayipaśyati,
tasyāhaṁ napraṇaśyāmisa ca me napraṇaśyati.[41]

Those who see me in everything and see everything in me, I am not invisible to such a person and he is not invisible to me.

Empathy

Don’t just do something, stand there – this is the basis of empathy. Normally, we do the opposite, we feel tempted to do something and not just stand there. But empathy is about just being there. It is the art of easing the pain of the other person by just being there for them in the most non-judgmental manner. Often we are tempted to give unsolicited advice or tell the other person to be strong when they share their grief with us. That won’t heal the other person. In fact, they may think that you don’t understand them. Empathy is about being a good listener.

In a small village, a farmer puts up a ‘Puppies for Sale’ sign outside his house. On a Sunday morning, a little boy knocked on his door.

“How much are they?” the young visitor said. “I want to buy one of your puppies.”

“They range between 100–1000 rupees.”

“Please, can I at least see them for a while for this much?” And, he pulled out a ten-rupee note.

The farmer thought for a moment and said, “That’s alright.

There’s no charge for seeing them.”

He opened the door of the doghouse and called out to a dog. Out came a female dog followed by six little puppies nearly rolling down the ramp like balls of fur. They were trying to match the strides of the mother. They quickly made their way to the fence while another puppy, noticeably smaller and slower, emerged from the shelter and limped his way to his mother.

“Can I buy that one, sir?” The boy pointed at the hobbling puppy. “I promise to pay you ten rupees every month for the next 10 months.”

The farmer knelt down at his side and said, “Son, you don’t want that puppy. Unlike the other dogs, he will never be able to run and play with you.”

“This is the puppy I want, sir.” The little boy stepped back a little and began rolling up one leg of his trousers. A steel brace, attached to a custom shoe, ran down both sides of his leg. “Actually, I don’t run too well myself, and he will

need someone who understands."

Nature has bestowed upon us an extraordinary emotion, empathy. It is the seed of compassion. Simply put, empathy is a genuine effort to see the world from the perspective of the other person. It is to step into their shoes to see where exactly it hurts. Empathy requires that we empty our mind and listen to the other person with our whole being. No understanding is possible unless we take in all that the other person is trying to tell us.

In his book on non-violent communication, Marshall Rosenberg cites a beautiful poem *Words are Windows or They're Walls* by Ruth Bebermeyer:

> I feel so sentenced by your words,
> I feel so judged and sent away,
> Before I go I've got to know,
> Is that what you mean to say?
>
> Before I rise to my defense,
> Before I speak in hurt or fear,
> Before I build that wall of words,
> Tell me, did I really hear?
>
> Words are windows, or they're walls,
> They sentence us, or set us free.
> When I speak and when I hear,
> Let the love light shine through me.
>
> There are things I need to say,
> Things that mean so much to me,
> If my words don't make me clear,
> Will you help me to be free?
>
> If I seemed to put you down,
> If you felt I didn't care,
> Try to listen through my words,
> To the feelings that we share.[42]

When you wish to empathize with someone, just listen. When you do that and do so sincerely, they'll start making perfect sense to you a while later. You'll begin to understand their challenges and barriers, their aches and pains. Most of us have automatic response to most things in life. But, with mindfulness, you can pick and choose your emotions. When you dislike something, you can choose from anger, repulsion, empathy, compassion, indifference or any one of the 27 other potential emotions experienced by us. When you continue to practice a

certain emotion as a conscious choice, it soon becomes your second nature. It is the reason why some people can be eternally angry or always selfish or mostly arrogant, and why some people are often kind, compassionate or considerate. At some point in time, they had chosen these emotional responses over others and they'd done so repeatedly until it was instilled in their DNA.

A young priest had never heard confessions before and he was a bit nervous.

"It's okay," said the bishop who had been mentoring him, "I'll sit in quietly and observe you. Just go with the flow."

After hearing many confessions, the young one asked his mentor if he had done it right. The bishop said that much was lacking. He agreed to do a demonstration. This time the bishop heard the confessions while the young priest sat quietly observing. After everyone was done, the bishop said to the priest, "Now don't you think that saying 'uh-oh', 'I see', 'please continue', 'it's okay my child', 'carry on' is better than slapping your knee and saying 'cool, what happened next!'"

Empathy is about listening quietly so you may gauge the extent of the other person's grief. Telling them to be strong or that they are overreacting is the worst form of empathy. In fact, even worse is when we say something like, "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me the other day."

The most important thing to remember about all the virtues is that they are not merely emotions, they are behavior. We don't always have to feel compassionate or empathic to show those emotions. A good meditator inching towards divinity can adopt a behavior that shows compassion and empathy.

You don't have to feel a certain way to act a certain way.

The reverse is more practical and effective; start acting a certain way and you'll start feeling that way. Empathy is an act before it becomes an emotion. It is, however, not possible to develop a sense of empathy without being sensitive towards others around us. In fact, it's hard to practice any virtue without having a degree of sensitivity. If you observe those who act most selfishly, often you'll discover that it's not that they are bad or ignoble, they just lack sensitivity.

A young student was taking a walk with a professor who was known for his kindness. As they went along, they saw a coat and a pair of old shoes lying in the path. These chattels belonged to a poor man who was employed in a field close by and had nearly finished his day's work.

The student turned to the professor, and said: "Let us play a prank: we will hide his shoes and conceal ourselves behind those bushes. It will be fun to wait

and see his perplexity when he can't find them."

"I don't think we should amuse ourselves at the expense of the other person," the professor replied. "Rather than hiding his shoes, let's put a coin into each shoe instead, and then we will hide ourselves and watch how the discovery affects him."

The student did so and they both went behind the bushes close by. The poor man soon finished his work and came across the field to the path where he had left his belongings. While putting on the coat he slipped his foot into one of the shoes but feeling something hard, pulled it out to check the shoe. Astonishment seized him when he found a coin in his shoe. He gazed upon the coin, turned it round, and examined it again and again. He looked around him on all sides, but nobody was to be seen.

Putting the money in his pocket, he proceeded to put on the other shoe only to go through the same fate. Completely overwhelmed, he fell upon his knees, looked up to the skies and said aloud a fervent thanksgiving in which he spoke of his sick and helpless wife and his children without bread, whom the timely bounty, from some unknown hand, would help him feed his family.

"Now," said the professor, "are you not more pleased than if you had played your intended trick?"

"Thank you, professor," the student said. "Today, I've understood what it really means when they say, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

You can't be a giving person unless you develop sensitivity. You can give someone grief or you can give them joy, it all depends on how sensitive you are towards them, their lives, their needs. So often, we take the presence of others in our life for granted. We joke around, we make fun, we share laughter. All of which is okay but when we do so insensitively, we don't just hurt them but we hurt our own existence too. The spiritual being in us takes a hit when we choose to be insensitive.

A good meditator is always mindful of his thoughts, actions and words. One of the most beautiful rewards of meditation is that it makes you more sensitive. It's a natural by-product. You feel what others are feeling around you.

The more spiritual you are, the more sensitive you will be. Empathy, love, compassion and charity come naturally to a sensitive person. Sensitivity is knowing the difference between being emphatic and being empathic. As they say, resolve to be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant with the weak and wrong. Sometime in your life, you will have been all of these.

For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.[43]

Humility

Legend has it that the king of Kazakhstan sent his royal messenger to the emperor of India, Jalal ud-din Muhammad Akbar, with three profound questions. Akbar's *navaratna*, nine jewels, were nine people of extraordinary talents. Known for his wit and wisdom, one of them was Birbal. The king wanted to hear the answers in person so, Birbal was seen off to deliver the same.

"Where does God live?" the king of Kazakhstan asked his first question.

Birbal demanded a glass of milk in response. As soon as he got it, he dipped his fingers in the glass and started rubbing them. "Hmm…" he said shaking his head. "There's no butter in this milk."

Everyone in the court laughed out loud, and then the king said, "You have to churn milk to get the cream. Further the cream must be churned to extract butter."

"Exactly, Your Excellency," Birbal said. "The butter is in the milk but we can't see it. The milk has to undergo a certain process before we can taste butter. Similarly, God lives in all living beings but an individual has to purify himself to experience the presence of God. He has to churn his consciousness and erase his ignoble thoughts, feelings and desires to extract the divinity."

"Very well," said the king, pleased with the answer. "What does God eat?"

A hush fell over the court.

"Clearly, if God lives then he must eat something too," he added. "Indeed, Your Majesty," Birbal replied instantly. "God does eat. He feasts on the false pride us humans have. Our history bears a witness to this. Eventually everyone is brought to justice in the divine court of law. Anyone who seeks God has to offer Him his ego."

"Beautiful!" exclaimed the king. "And, what does God do?" "To answer this question, you'll have to come closer to me,"

Birbal said.

The king was taken aback at the instruction but curious to find the answer, he stepped down from his throne and went where Birbal was standing.

"I can only answer your question by sitting on your throne," Birbal said

bowing his head.

The courtiers frowned at the suggestion and nervous whispers ran through the court.

“So be it,” the king said. “I must find the answer.”

With utmost grace, Birbal climbed the regal staircase and sat on the throne, a place where no one other than the king had ever seated.

Resting his hands on the two diamond-studded armrests, Birbal spoke like an emperor, “This is what God does, O king! In an instant, an ordinary mortal like me, born in poor family, gets to be the king where, on the other hand, you, a born king, is dethroned with least resistance.”

“You’ve proven beyond doubt, Birbal, that the wittiest man on earth serves in Akbar’s court.”

The king rewarded him amply and Birbal was given a royal farewell.

With this story, I don’t mean to say that some ‘person’ is calling the shots up there. I leave that to your individual belief.

Every now and then, people ask me how to feel God’s presence in their lives. I tell them to be grateful for what all they have been blessed with because gratitude is the quickest antidote of negativity. When you are positive and grateful, everything in this world looks divine. But, how to experience the divinity on a more constant basis? I say practice compassion consciously. If you think it’s not easy, then I suppose, the only way out is to undergo self-purification. The more you purify yourself, the greater sensitivity you develop to perceive what normally lies outside human perception.

Leading a virtuous life and a regular practice of meditation can purify anyone. Adopting virtues are even more important than meditation or any religious practice. Having said that, meditation does strengthen your mind, it makes you more mindful, so that you can stand up to your principles in the face of temptations (and there will be many). But, ultimately, it’s humility that keeps us grounded and real.

Reflecting on Birbal’s answers, humility keeps us in touch with our source. Otherwise, ego raises its hood far too quickly. The venom ego spits is enough to blind even the most sane person in a matter of moments. The most potent antidote of false ego is humility.

Overcome with spiritual ecstasy, an archbishop approaches the altar in great rush. He gets down on his knees and cries, “I’m nobody, Lord! I’m nobody! Nobody!”

The bishop in attendance sees the extraordinary humility and devotional sentiment of the archbishop. Overwhelmed with love for God, he too runs to the altar yelling, “Lord, I’m nobody! I’m nobody, Lord!”

It so happened that a janitor was mopping the floor nearby. He saw how two deeply religious people were one with God. He got goosebumps. Filled with piety and a fervent spirit, he drops his mop and also dashes to the altar, proclaiming, “I’m nobody! Oh Lord, hear me, I’m nobody! Nobody!”

The archbishop takes notice, turns to the bishop and says, “Look, who thinks he’s nobody!”

If our humility is false or pretentious like that of the archbishop and the bishop in the anecdote, it will only make us more egoistic. False humility fails all spiritual tests. There’s no room for exhibitionism and vanity on the divine path.

Guru Nanak differentiates most beautifully between false external humility versus true inner humility.

> *miṭhatunīvīnānakāguṇacaṃgiāītātatu.*
> *sabhukonivaiāpakau para kaunivaina koi.*
> *dharitārājūtolīainivaisugaurā hoi.*
> *aparādhīdūṇānivai jo haṃtāmiragāhi.*
> *sīsinivāiaikiāthīaijāridaikusudhejāhi.*[44]
>
> Sweetness and humility, O Nanak, are the essence of virtue and goodness.
> Everyone bows down to himself; no one bows down to another.
> *When you weigh it on the scale, the heavier side is always lower.*
> The sinner, like the deer hunter, bows down twice as much.
> But what can be achieved by bowing the head, when the heart is impure?

As you begin to shed your ego, you become humble naturally. A humble mind is a beautiful mind. It’s far more receptive to spiritual growth and attainment than an egoist mind, no matter how learned. The tree laden with fruits is always a bit bent. Not because of any burden but because it has something to offer. Humility of conduct and speech take you closer to your source.

The more you have to offer, the humbler you are naturally. In the same storm where mighty winds fallgiant trees, the humble blades of grass dance and sway unharmed.

Bertrand Russell once said, “One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one’s work is terribly important.”[45]

Humility keeps us away from melancholy. It helps us realize that in the vast, grand and eternal play of nature, no one is indispensable or vitally significant. Each one of us is a pawn in the universal game of chess. You may capture the

queen or checkmate the king, ultimately though, everything gets packed and goes inside the same box.

karmaṇyevādhikārastemāphaleṣukadācana,
mā karma-phala-heturbhūrmātesaṅgo 'stvakarmaṇi.[46]

You only control your actions and not their outcomes. Therefore, you have the right to engage in karma but the results of your karma are decided by many other forces. Act with a certain detachment knowing that you are not the doer.

Faith

A **man, worried and** paranoid, asked his enlightened master if everything would be alright in the future. “I know I should have faith but I can’t get around to let go. I’m still worried. What if things don’t go the way they should? Negative thoughts render me unable to enjoy my life. What if God doesn’t take care of me?” he said to his master.

The master took a rosebud, gave it to the disciple, and said, “Your task is to unfold the bud keeping all the petals intact.”

The disciple carefully began opening the rosebud. Soon, however, he realized that it was not possible to unfold it without damaging the petals. “It’s not as simple as it looked. I’m sorry, but at least some petals will be damaged,” he said to his master.

In reply, the master took the rosebud from him and said:

It is only a tiny rosebud,
A flower of God’s design,
But I cannot unfold the petals,
With these clumsy hands of mine.

The secret of unfolding flowers
Is not known to such as I.
God opens this flower so sweetly,
Then in my hands they die.

If I cannot unfold a rosebud,
This flower of God’s design,
Then how can I have the wisdom,
To unfold this life of mine?

So I’ll trust in God for leading,
each moment of my day.
I will look to God for His guidance,
each step of the way.

The pathway that lies before me,
Only God knows.

I'll trust Him to unfold the moments,
Just as He unfolds the rose.

How much can you plan, after all? And how much do you want to plan? Why do you want to keep everything in your hands? It's tiring. Who took care of you when you were in the womb? Who fed you when you didn't even know how to speak? Who provided for you when you were too young to earn your own living? If you examine, you'll find there was always someone there, a medium Nature had already chosen for you. Sometimes letting go is simply reminding yourself that you've done whatever you could and now you must free yourself from the outcome or the worry.

Faith is designed to give you the confidence, the courage to lead your life with grace and conviction. It doesn't mean we can just confess and be done with our bad karma, rather, we should have the strength to do the right karma at the first place. I don't think God will manifest to pay off your mortgage, your loans – karmic or financial – or to help you shed or gain weight. We must take responsibility of our own lives.

We are the result of our desires, choices and pursuits. Faith, with all its paraphernalia and practices, is for inner strength and not to please an external God. I don't want to please a heavenly being and beg for favors in this life or hereafter, instead, I would give this life my best shot and let Nature take its own course. After all, if I truly have faith, shouldn't I know that God or Nature's way is impartial?

A quote often attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte says, "When you fight, fight as if everything depends on you. And when you pray, pray as if everything depends on God." This is faith in a nutshell.

Faith is supposed to complement, and not replace, our actions.

Ultimately, we are responsible for the choices we make.

Faith is the understanding that not everything is in my control. I'll do everything in my reach to do whatever I can about things that are in my control and leave the rest in the hands of this vast universe. As Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in *The Serenity Prayer*:

God, grant me the serenity to
accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.

There were only two things that helped me walk the path of meditation even

though I had no significant results for many years. The first was my determination. I wanted to be sure either way. I wanted to be sure if meditation was what all it had claimed out to be or it wasn’t; I didn’t want to quit midway. The second, and more important, it was faith that kept me going. A simple belief that effort never gets wasted. In one form or the other, the consequences of any action don’t perish. Nature registers every little karma. I had this faith that if I kept digging patiently, one day I would hit a source of pure water. I did. You will too if you keep going.

Hurdles on the Path

- Physical and Environmental Hurdles
- Emotional Hurdles
- Mental Hurdles
  - Restlessness
  - Dullness
  - Thoughts
  - Images
- Other Hurdles

vyādhistyānasanśaya pramādālasyāvirati
bhrāntidarśanālabdha bhūmikatvānavasthitatvāni
cittavikṣēpāstēntarāyāḥ.[47]

Disease, sluggishness, doubt, inattentiveness, torpor, unrestrained senses, erroneous views, procrastination, and relapse are the obstacles in one's practice.

Physical and Environmental Hurdles

Can you learn swimming without ever jumping into a pool? I think not. If you are serious about swimming then you need a certain fitness in your body and access to a river or pool where you can put your learning to practice. Until you actually start swimming, you won't know what swimming is about. To champion it, a bit of guidance, right fitness and right environment is necessary.

It's no different when it comes to meditation.

Especially if you wish to master the concentrative meditation where good posture is a non-negotiable requirement, excellent physical shape is a must. Equally important is a conducive environment. As it is, it's a hard task to quiet one's mind. If there are external distractions or sounds at that, it will become nearly impossible to meditate.

Long before I went to the Himalayas for my intense meditation, I used to have noise-cancellation headphones and an iPod mini. I would put in my favourite music, slip on my headphones and just immerse myself in meditation. It was the best I could do to cut out any external disturbances as much as possible.

In the beginning stages of meditation, feel free to adopt whatever method works for you. Be it meditating in the dead of the night when it is quieter or simply focussing on music.

Eventually, as you intensify your practice, you'll benefit much from parking yourself in a quiet spot which is safe, clean and conducive and meditate there. If you are serious about competing in the Olympics, you've got to practice in an Olympic-size pool. Physical hurdles are of two types: bodily and environmental.

All physical ailments and diseases represent bodily hurdles.

They could be in the form of obesity, stiffness, disability or any other limitations that prohibit the meditator from sitting still. In case a disability is permanent, a meditator may tread the path and perfect himself using other forms of meditation. Such a practitioner need not worry about concentrative meditation.

Any of the five systems of meditation can lead one to the dawning of the

realization as long as one persists right till the end. Ailments such as asthma, flu, gastritis, sinusitis, headaches and epilepsy can be hurdles in concentrative and contemplative meditation. This body is a divine blessing. No *sadhana* is possible without a fit body. A sincere meditator takes good care of his body. The yogis are fastidious about diet and exercise because these two elements play the greatest part in maintaining physical fitness. A fit body is essential for a serious aspirant to face the rigours of meditation. It is no secret that when we exercise, even though we may feel a bit tired, we experience a certain freshness. No matter the nature of your meditation, a lethargic body adversely affects the quality of your meditation.

Environmental hurdles include challenges concerning the actual place, surroundings, people, animals and weather conditions. A sincere meditator, the one who is in for the long haul, should carefully select a place for meditation. It should not be noisy but somewhat comfortable. It need not be luxurious, in fact, material luxury can be distracting for a beginner meditator.

There it should be easy access to water, food and other basic necessities.

When I meditated in the Himalayas for many months, the greatest challenge was posed by the rats. Even though I was practically in a place covered in snow, the rats were omnipresent. I would see bear marks just outside my hut in the morning or at times the wild boar would snort around loudly. The other hindrance was from spiders; I used to sit for very long periods and they would crawl up and weave webs around my face and limbs. The third greatest challenge was from the incessant chatter of birds. Some birds were so loud that it took me time and intense concentration to be able to go past their tweets (they knew about tweeting long before Twitter came into being!) and focus on my object of meditation. I used to virtually sleep on the floor and the weather conditions were extremely harsh.

There was a time I meditated in a slightly warmer place and there I was plagued by snakes and wild lizards. Once I chose the plains and it was hot, infested with scorpions. There was no respite from these wild creatures wherever I chose to meditate but I would like to add that the forces of nature, the lineage of gurus really take care of a true seeker.

Throughout my meditation, not one wild animal – a snake, scorpion, rat, giant spiders or a lizard – ever harmed me. Not even once. This is ultimately what meditation is about – experiencing and living in divine union. For, if you truly see God in all creatures what’s there to worry then? And if you don’t, what’s there to see then? My suggestion is to carefully choose a place that offers you

quietude and is inhabitable.

avidyā-asmitā-rāga-dveṣa-abhiniveśaḥkleśāḥ.
avidyākṣetram-uttareṣāmprasupta-tanu-vicchinn-odārāṇām.
svarasvāhividuṣo-'pi samārūḍho-'bhiniveśaḥ[48]

The five afflictions which disturb the equilibrium of consciousness are: ignorance or lack of wisdom, ego, pride of the ego or the sense of 'I', attachment to pleasure, aversion to pain, fear of death and clinging to life. Lack of true knowledge is the source of all pains and sorrows whether dormant, attenuated, interrupted or fully active. Self-preservation or attachment to life is the subtlest of all afflictions. It is found even in wise men.

Emotional Hurdles

It is normal to experience intense feelings while meditating. They can range from hysterical joy or laughter to acute resentment and everything in between. From the perspective of meditation, all emotions act as hurdles. It's like a sprinter must not celebrate before he crosses the finish line. Any emotion, no matter how joyous or sorrowful, will distract the athlete. Such is the case with meditation too.

Both negative and positive emotions distract and make a meditator restless. The type you are holding a session on (whether concentrative, contemplative, mindful, observant or any other type) is immaterial. Anything that deviates you from your focus is a hurdle. If you do your meditation correctly, you become a reservoir of positive emotions naturally. During the meditation, however, it is important for a meditator to stay perfectly even. To that effect, there are eight worldly emotions, categorized into positive and negative, that are detrimental to good meditation.

The Four Positive Emotions

When a positive emotion is triggered, you feel happy, good, important, motivated and strong. You feel like you can take on the whole world. You are the same you, but something within you changes when you experience a positive emotion. There are four types of positive emotions:

Pleasure

All sense gratification, everything you do and experience through your body for joy, falls under this category.

Praise

If you or your work gets recognition or appreciation, you naturally feel good.

Gain

This is when you believe you have made a gain, material or otherwise. It could range from winning a lottery ticket to killing a mosquito; one may boost your bank account, and, the other may satisfy your ego.

Delightful Words

Someone offers you a compliment, it spontaneously triggers a positive emotion, especially if you feel it was a genuine compliment.

The Four Negative Emotions

The four negative ones are the exact opposite of above. They make you feel low, pensive, crippled and weak. They are triggered when you feel perturbed by displeasure, criticism, loss, and dreadful words.

Overcoming Emotional Hurdles During Meditation

Emotions are a group of lingering thoughts. Just like a beehive hosts many bees and when they buzz together it's a louder, collective sound. Emotions are no different. A group of thoughts are buzzing at once. At the root, they are just thoughts. If you learn to drop the thought with mindfulness, whatever be your emotional state, it will pass. Allow it to pass. It is cyclical and it is temporary – that is all you have to remember.

Once upon a time in a certain village lived a prominent trader. He was wealthy, honourable and a man of repute, and yet he was restless and worried. He could not shed his fears, of failure, of losing, of unknown. He approached his spiritual master and pleaded, "With your grace I have everything yet I am always afraid and worried. Please give me wisdom so that I may be peaceful under all circumstances, no matter what."

"So, you want to be peaceful under all circumstances?" the guru confirmed.

"Yes, your holiness."

The master grabbed a piece of sacred *bhojapatra*, the bark of birch tree, dipped his pen in ink made from vermilion and scribbled something on it. He let the charm dry for a few minutes, folded it and gave it to him. "Here, always keep this with you. Open this only when you feel your worst fear has come true."

The trader prostrated before his master and went back. A terrible drought hit

that region two years later and his financial situation went into tatters. He had no stock to sell, debtors were unable to pay their dues and creditors started chasing him for theirs. They dragged him to court, made him sell his house, mortgaged his wife's jewellery and had his warehouses pawned. He pleaded and he prayed but nothing worked. His master had already left for secluded meditation on forbidden peaks. It was time to read his guru's inscription, he thought.

He unfolded it to see the contents; it read, "Stay firm, stay course. This will pass."

The words had magical effect on him. He decided to not lose hope. He realized that things could not stay like this forever, that it was temporary. And temporary it surely was as the following three years saw heavy rains and bumper crop. He bounced back. Wealth and honour came back in his life. He was overjoyed. His guru was back too. He promptly made arrangements to see his master with all kinds offerings.

Prostrating before the guru, he said, "With your grace, I'm so happy. Business has never been this good. To tell you the truth, I'm over the moon."

"Do you have the *bhojapatra* with you?" the guru asked calmly. "Open it and read again what it says."

He obeyed and the words on it reminded him that even this phase was temporary. Just like the bad times, even this would pass. From joy and excitement, his state of mind shifted to bliss and peace.

"This is eternal wisdom, my son," the master added. "Stay even. It's all cyclical."

During meditation, emotions can be like gentle breeze sometimes; they uplift your mood and you meditate better. Sometimes though, the same emotions can be like tornadoes, ripping through your resolve and disturbing your equipoise.

They may come to you positively or negatively, in the form of lust or loathing, wonderful moments of the past or terrible fears of the future. Either ways, they pull you off-track, distract you and spoil your concentration.

There is a simple way of overcoming emotional hurdles during your meditation. When you find it difficult to focus due to positive or negative emotions, stop your meditation, remain seated in your posture and do deep breathing for a few minutes. Further, to overcome distractions on account of positive emotions, visualize a neutral image (like a stone, pebble or a ball of your favourite colour) or focus on your breath. Just become aware that you are overwhelmed with positive emotions presently. Let them pass. To cross the

hurdles posed by negative emotions during your meditation, think of bright light, visualize an image that makes you happy. For example, a sunrise or sunset by the ocean, a form of your chosen deity, or simply blue sky, anything that makes you feel light basically.

Don’t worry about not being able to meditate, don’t worry about the diversion. Simply calm yourself down, get your equipoise back before you resume your meditation.

Emotional hurdles, however, are not the primary hurdles in meditation. Most of the time, you’ll find that the quality of your meditation is affected not on account of overwhelming emotions but something completely different. I call them mental blocks or hurdles. And they are of four types: restlessness, dullness, stray thoughts and random images.

virāma-pratyaya-abhyāsa-pūrvaḥsaṁskāra-śeṣo-'nyaḥ.[49]

Hidden impressions lie dormant, but spring up during moments of awareness, creating fluctuations and disturbing the purity of the consciousness.

Restlessness

As you sit down to meditate, after a few seconds, stray thoughts from all directions start to hit you. As you continue to try and build your concentration, you experience a certain degree of restlessness. It almost feels the more you try to stay away from your thoughts, the stronger they seem to come and get you making you restless. It is normal.

Restlessness can be in the form of anxiety, resentment, excitement or sensual stimuli. It is normal for all beginners, intermediate and advanced meditators; only the adepts are spared, that too by the sheer virtue of their practice and experience. The difference between an adept and an aspirant is that the former is aware of the restlessness as soon as it arises and promptly uses the mental application to pacify his mind, whereas an aspirant allows such mental restlessness to overpower him destabilizing his otherwise settled mind.

When you experience restlessness, and as it builds up, during your meditation, you may feel the uncontrollable urge to move, shift, talk, or even end your session. Thoughts in the form of emotions, experiences and plans linked to past or future may make you anxious, excited or aroused. A lingering thought over some right or wrong action may cause resentment.

While following the six principles of meditation, during the practice of meditation, especially concentrative meditation, it’s absolutely critical that you don’t pursue your thoughts or engage in recollection of any nature. You must not engage in any cognitive activity of examining right or wrong, good or bad and so forth. Simply remember that thoughts are just thoughts, they are devoid of any essence or meaning on their own. You should simply drop any thought that comes to your mind without reacting to it. Remind yourself to not be impatient when you feel restless. Just focus on your object of meditation by shifting your attention and persist patiently. It is okay to stop your meditation for a few minutes while you pacify your mind.

Restless Mind – A Grumpy Toddler

Let me use a metaphor to help you understand the cause of restlessness. Imagine you are walking through a shopping mall. You have a three-year-old toddler with you. He is happily holding your hand making you feel proud of his behaviour and obedience. Suddenly, he spots a candy store with flashing signs, attractive display, animated cartoon characters and everything else he could possibly fancy. He wants to go to the store. You, however, have other plans and want him to simply be with you. He insists on going in the direction of the candy store, you tell him otherwise. His efforts intensify, so does your grip on him. He gets louder, and, your stance, more commanding. He is unmoving and you are unyielding. He gets agitated, decides to lie down on the floor and starts throwing tantrums. At that point in time, you have four choices:

a. Let him throw tantrums while you feel somewhat embarrassed in the public.
b. Try to pacify him with the promise of taking him there in the future.
c. Take him to the candy store and get him the candies.
d. Overpower him, lift him and rush to the parking lot.

It is not a desirable situation and none of the options seem to be pleasant. This is exactly what happens when your mind becomes restless. It starts to behave like the grumpy toddler. It tries all sorts of tricks to get its way.

What Causes Restlessness During Meditation

The interesting thing is that the mind does not become restless on its own during meditation. It is only when you try too hard to concentrate or force your mind to think a certain way (rather than gently guiding it), that the mind becomes restless. At that moment, it wants to break free of the obedience of posture, concentration and stability. A conditioned mind is not designed to operate according to you, it is strong enough to lead so that you follow what it wants. These are the natural tendencies of the mind because mind does not want to be told or controlled.

“I try very hard to control myself, my anger and my negative emotions but they always win over me,” a disciple once said to Buddha. “O Venerable One! How do I overcome this weakness of mine?”

Buddha ignored his question and kept moving. After a while, he sat down in lotus posture under a banyan tree and spoke, “I’m thirsty. Can you get me water

from the river?”

Eager to serve his master, the disciple moved towards the river at once. Before he could lower the bowl and fill it, a man with a bullock cart started crossing the shallow river. The water became turbid. Dismayed, the disciple went back empty handed. “The water is muddy and unfit for drinking as a bullock cart just crossed the river.”

Buddha nodded. After a little while, he asked the disciple to try again. The water was still murky and he came back empty handed again. “It was less muddy,” he said, “but still unsuitable for drinking.”

Buddha maintained quietude for half an hour before instructing him to go back again. The disciple was pleased to find clear water this time, the mud and other particles had settled down. He filled the bowl with water and went back to the master. With utmost mindfulness, Buddha took a few sips. He put the bowl down and said, “You see, when the water became muddy, the easiest method to clean it was to let it be. Had you made any attempt to clear it at the time, it would have ended up getting worse. You just let it be, you simply waited and the mud settled down on its own. Other than patience, there was no effort. Similarly, when your mind is greatly disturbed just let it be. It’ll calm down, it’ll settle in due course, give it a little time, be patient.”

The Remedy

The best way to overcome restlessness is to stop meditating at that moment. Stay in the posture if you can but make no attempts to concentrate. Hold a little dialogue with yourself. Just relax. Stop all efforts to meditate. Take a deep breath. Get into a self- communion on any subject matter you like, not the one that will arouse you but something that will give your mind a break from the act of concentration. If restlessness still persists, just get up and take a break. Resume after some time.

We have to distract the toddler till we are past the candy store. When your mind is tired, give it rest, when it is restless, pacify it. Give it a bait, do not be too hard for too long. We are teaching it discipline, we want it to move according to you. Be patient. Calm it down. Restlessness is normal and pacification is an art, a skill. Have you ever seen an expert dog trainer? A good trainer knows when to reward versus reprimand, when to leash versus let loose, when to be soft versus strong. And, this is all there is to learn in meditation, that is, when to be firm with your mind versus when to let it roam free. It comes with practice. The

more familiar you get with yourself, the more effective is your meditation.

Eventually, we want to take a route where the toddler doesn’t get to see the candy shop in the first place, or the toy store, or the swings. If he does not spot those, he will continue to be a happy child while you shop. No candies, no tantrums.

śraddhā-vīrya-smṛtisamādhi-prajñā-pūrvakaitareṣām.[50]

Practice must be pursued with faith, confidence, vigor, keen memory and power of absorption to break the complacency.

Dullness

Raghu Swami, one of my foremost disciples, once shared his life in a certain ashram where he lived for more than seven years. The ashram had a strict routine.

“We had to get up at 4 AM and be ready in the meditation hall by 4:30 AM,” he said enthusiastically. “And from 4:30 till 6:30, it was the best part of my day. Truly divine.”

I was anticipating he would share some insight about his meditation but he just kept smiling.

“Why was it the best part of your day?” I asked.

“Because I would always fall asleep,” he replied with his lips curling upwards in a big smile, “I could never sleep so deeply while on my bed as I did in the morning meditation.”

We both had a hearty laugh.

The primary difference between Raghu Swami and numerous other meditators I’ve met is that Raghu Swami was forthcoming in his confession. Even advanced meditators routinely fall prey to the second most common defect in meditation, laziness.

Laziness is of two types. Let us say that you have decided to meditate for 45 minutes every day. That is your resolution. The first type of laziness makes you want to skip your meditation. Your conscious mind gives you excuses because it does not enjoy being tamed, it wants to go its own way dragging you along. Purity of discipline is paramount in executing any plan, be it meditation or any other routine. The only way to encounter laziness of this type is to not listen to your mind. If you sit down and vow to meditate no matter what, your conscious mind will eventually understand that you are the master and that you have no plans of showing any laxity when it comes to following your discipline.

The second form of laziness, is what we are concerned with over here. It is the one you encounter *during* your meditation.

As you sit down to meditate, motionless, still in one posture, you enjoy the first few minutes. In the beginning, you are aware of the restless nature of the

conscious mind. You work hard to channelize your thoughts, you exert to concentrate and you try to stay focused. When you do that, you experience restlessness. Such restlessness may prompt you to move, engage in thoughts or abandon your session of meditation altogether. The best way to overcome such restlessness is to relax at that point in time.

As you relax, however, you run the risk of losing sharpness of the mind. Such relaxation, if unchecked, can lead to inertness, inattentiveness, stupor or torpor. Above all, it robs you off the clarity of your visualization. A meditation that lacks lucidity is as good as sleeping. If you are meditating by way of mental visualization for example, the image you were holding mentally dims and disappears. If you are meditating on a mantra, it becomes a superficial exercise of just mentally chanting the mantra and you are no longer hearing it, let alone becoming one with it. Basically, your meditation has lost its lucidity, its crispness and has now become a mostly useless activity of sitting still pointlessly.

Laziness during meditation can take the form of dullness of the mind or lethargy of the body. If your mind experiences dullness or sluggishness, the clarity of the object of meditation disappears. A session of meditation that is not clear, crisp and lucid, will not allow you to experience even a relaxed state of mind, much less its natural one.

You will get up from your meditation feeling quasi relaxed, the type you feel after a nap. Often an overwhelming number of meditators mistake that for good meditation. Good meditation is not about putting your conscious mind to sleep, it is clearing it. Such clearing brings bliss and sublime sensations with it. If a meditator gets into the habit of meditating incorrectly without actively working towards clearing the hurdles, it becomes extremely hard to get rid of such flaws later on.

Lazy Mind – A Slow Elephant

A lazy mind in various meditational, yogic and tantric texts has been compared to the slow moving elephant. The hurdle of dullness is as big as the elephant. It is for this reason that many meditational deities are shown holding a goad, the weapon used to prod an elephant. The esoteric meaning behind such implement is to always hold the goad of attentiveness and alertness to control the elephant of sluggishness.

Just like an animal as large as an elephant, can obstruct your vision when in

front of you, laziness of the mind obstructs your path of bliss and oneness. Think of the hibernating python or the one in deep slumber. It is still, calm but that does not equate to meditation. If you are lazy or restless, however still you may be sitting, it is not meditation. A meditation full of flaws is like a pot full of holes; just like the latter is unable to carry water, the former is unable to retain bliss.

What Causes Laziness in Meditation?

Imagine you are trying to move a big rock. You keep exerting your force. It is only natural that after a while you are going to feel exhausted and tired. Exactly the same thing happens with your mind. When you try hard to concentrate, and keep doing so even when you feel restless, there comes a time when you feel worn out and tired. If you are not attentive at that time, you will slip into stupor at that very moment. Such dullness compromises your meditation.

In every likelihood, presuming you are physically fit, you will experience restlessness before feeling lazy. If you can take corrective measures at the time of restlessness, it becomes relatively easy to overcome laziness. Like an athlete who gradually builds his endurance, his physical strength raising his pain barrier, a good meditator steadily increases the duration of his meditation. At the peak of my own meditation practice, I used to meditate for a straight stretch of ten hours. It was not easy, but the results were astounding. I did not start sitting ten hours from day one, in fact, I started with multiple one hour sessions gradually increasing them over the course of many years.

The Remedy

The moment you realize you are losing sharpness of your meditation, you need to exert mentally. You must refresh your concentration, recalibrate your focus. If your laziness has resulted from physical exhaustion, you need to stop meditating.

That can happen, if your meditation sessions are longer than 90 minutes each, or if you had a particularly stressful and tiring day. Under such circumstances, you should take a break, get up and inhale some fresh air, drink a little bit of water, walk around a bit and resume your session.

If you experience dullness as a result of mental exhaustion, something that can happen even after the first 20 minutes of your meditation, you must not get up and break your session. Instead, try to visualize a bright light, or focus on the enchanting aspects of your object of meditation while staying in the same

posture. Refresh and energize yourself without getting up or ending your meditation. Shift your attention elsewhere for the time being but do not engage in thoughts that are not linked to your meditation. As you feel fresh again, relax and resume your original meditation. You need not exert any longer. Let the mind stay in its natural state. If you keep exerting, you will feel restless.

Balance is crucial. When you feel restless, relax; and, when you feel lazy, exert, concentrate. Restlessness and dullness repeatedly interfere with your meditation. They almost take turns. You need alertness to identify and correct both flaws. Hold short but lucid sessions and gradually increase the duration. Learn to meditate flawlessly for short periods first. When you learn to harness laziness and check restlessness, you are bound to make remarkable progress on the path of meditation.

dhyānaheyāḥtad-vṛttayaḥ.[51]

When the modifications still have some potency of coloring (*klishta*), they are brought to the state of mere potential by meditation (*dhyana*).

Stray Thoughts

Even though I've used the term stray thoughts, the truth is that in meditation any thought that is not the one you are meditating on is a stray thought. It is one of the chief blocks and the hardest to overcome. All meditators, when they sit down and meditate, are bombarded by thoughts from all directions.

Thoughts are inseparable from the mind just like heat from fire. The act of concentration requires you to make a conscious and exerting effort to focus only on the desired thought. The art of meditation is to be able to hold that thought with perfect ease, without any undue exertion, with a sharp and still mind free of dullness and stupor. An adept is able to hold his session of meditation for as long he wants whereas an aspirant is able to meditate under favourable circumstances only, such as, pleasant surroundings, calm mind, no major stress, good physical health and so forth. Stray thoughts act like rocks thrown in a still lake.

Like the physical world outside, your inner world is interdependent and interconnected. For example, in the outside world, if there is no fuel, your car fails to move; if there is no road, there is nowhere to drive your car; if there is no energy, there is no way to run the fuel refineries; if there are no vehicles, there are no methods to transport the fuel, and so on. Everything is interdependent. No independent phenomenon exists in the outside material world. However exhaustive you may examine, you will get to the same conclusion. One thing links to another.

This is exactly the case with your inner world of thoughts too. While meditating, if you fail to check the very first thought, be prepared to be bogged down by a thousand more. Let us say that you feel thirsty during meditation. Naturally, you think water, and from water maybe you think of an instance of buying bottled water, the shop, swiping the credit card. From credit card your mind may jump to an incident when you purchased gasoline with it, that may remind you of the gas prices, cost of living, your scarce resources, how you could or should have saved in the past. From savings, you may jump to future planning and on and on and on and on and on and on… Suddenly, you feel loss of focus, energy, and concentration. Had you gotten back to your object of

meditation the moment you thought of water, you would have been saved from all the rest.

Stray Thoughts – A Natural Hurdle

The natural state of mind is like the quiet, expansive sea. Thoughts are like waves. They can be tidal at times. Restlessness can be compared to a sea storm. Laziness is like the floating ship that has its engines shut down and is simply moving in the direction of the wind. Just like a sea is not sea without waves, mind is not mind without thoughts.

A conditioned mind's natural tendency is to engage in thoughts. Anytime you pay attention, you will find yourself in thinking mode. During your meditation, as you become increasingly attentive getting past restlessness and sluggishness, you are met with the hurdle of thoughts. This is a catch-22 situation. Thoughts cause restlessness and when unchecked, they also make you dull and tired compromising your meditation. As you continue to strike a balance between relaxation and exertion during your meditation, you start to gain control over your thought flow. They keep pouring, though. You need not feel bad.

This is natural. Thoughts have no intrinsic value or power. In the beginning, as long as you have an awareness, you will have thoughts. Eventually, with great practice, you learn to replace your thoughts with the only thought you are meditating on even if you are meditating on no thought, on emptiness.

The Remedy

It's quite simple, do not react at any thought, just drop it and get back to your point of meditation. Treat all thoughts with equal indifference. Do not examine or place any importance on any thought. Use mindfulness and alertness to detect the thought at the point of emergence and drop it that very moment. As you continue to practice your meditation with mindfulness and vigilance, thoughts not only become feeble but almost stop emerging after a certain point. In that supreme quietude, when you continue your meditation with awareness, you inevitably experience transcendental bliss.

tepratiprasava-heyāḥsūkṣmāḥ.[52]

When the five types of colourings (*kleshas*) are in their subtle, merely potential form, they are then destroyed by their disappearance or cessation into and of the field of mind itself.

Random Images

Flashing of random images present one of the subtlest forms of hurdles. After you have diligently worked towards pacifying your mind, the onslaught of the thoughts poses a great challenge. Once you are past restlessness, dullness and thoughts, random images with no connection to your current state of mind start appearing out of nowhere.

Let us say you sit down to meditate with resolve and attentiveness. After a while you start to feel restless, you feel the urge to move or to end your session. After you check restlessness by calming your mind, a sort of lethargy and dullness blankets you. Many people erroneously term it relaxation or a good meditative experience. Good meditators, however, staying alert, apply mental exertion with attentiveness to overcome this hurdle. As you progress with a mind that is neither dull nor restless, the natural tendency to engage in thoughts spring up. Soon, you find yourself either pursuing a thought or actively engaging in it.

For example, you might recall a conversation, an unpleasant one. Forgetting that you are meditating, you start to mentally pursue that conversation, you start to think how you should have said this or said that, or, how you should have responded in such and such manner, how the person was ungrateful, shallow, rude, wrong and so on. When you are mindful to not pursue a thought, the fourth hurdle still affects the quality of your meditation as random images start flashing in front of your inner eye.

You may see a banana, with mindfulness you remind yourself not to pursue the thought and image of banana. You drop the thought, but then out of nowhere you may see a Ferrari or a beautiful sandy beach or something. Continuous flash of images means there’s an undercurrent of restlessness still present.

In a way, this is the greatest and the subtlest hurdle because it is innate, a natural fabric of conditioned mind. It does not leave you even when you are sleeping, causing dreams. As you try to focus on your object of meditation, you find yourself battling with appearances, images stored in your memory. You are not engaging in any thought process or pursuing any mental conversation and yet you keep getting hit with the images of people, things, events, and so on. They

severely impede your ability to meditate correctly.

Images: The Flowing Wind

In any place, even if empty of all existence, there always exists air. Further, there is always movement in the air, however inert that may be. So, in a way, wind is omnipresent. Only a vacuum maybe devoid of such phenomenon. A vacuum is an artificial construct though, it is not a natural state. Similarly, even when a mind is empty of all thoughts, restlessness and sluggishness, there still exists memory. In fact, it is the basis of your analytical skills and your intelligence. You may be a Nobel laureate in physics, or a genius in calculus, in an unconscious state, in the absence of memory, however, you are unable to count even up to three.

What Causes Images During Meditation?

Your memory is the source of all imagery. Anything you see or hear even once, always stays in your memory. Whether it is a giant ship or a needle sinking in the sea, it retains both, always and forever. It is not possible to erase your memory. It is, however, possible to cleanse it to the degree that the image flashing in front of you fails to trigger any subsequent thought or emotion. Over time, as you become indifferent to thoughts and images of the past, their impact on your emotional state wears off. And, anything that does not evoke an emotion in you of any nature is not detrimental to your state of peace and calm.

The Remedy

What do you do when you are in a windy area? You cannot battle or win against the wind. All you can do is cover yourself, to not face the wind, and accept it. In much the same manner, there is no need to react to the images. You simply cover yourself with a balance of alertness and relaxation, exertion and pacification. Soon, images start disappearing. As you continue to meditate, intentionally recalling only the object of visualization each time, other images start to fade away automatically. Further, leading a righteous life in line with the virtues spelled out earlier, you find yourself increasingly calm and strong. You recall less and less of disturbing, enticing or exciting images. Their impact becomes negligible and their recollection, faint.

piṇḍasthaṃrūpsamsthaṃcarūpasthaṃrūpavarjitam,
brahmaitāsminmatāvasthāhṛdyaṃcapraśāmyati,
ityetekathitāvighnājñānarūpevyavasthitāḥ.[53]

Brahman is in the body or He is the maker of form, or He has a form, or He has no form, or He is everything – all these consoling doctrines are obstacles. Such notions are impediments on the path of wisdom.

Other Hurdles

A new disciple, after listening to his master's sermon, approached him and asked, "Is it fair to say that God is one and that same God lives in all?"

"If I say 'Yes', you will think you have understood without understanding," the guru replied. "And if I say 'No' you will misunderstand."

Meditation insists on discovery of your truth based on experiential understanding and not conditioned beliefs. While growing up, we are told this is right and that is wrong, God is an idol or God is a holy book and so on. The path of discovering your true nature with meditation requires that we put aside all our beliefs, clean our slate and let our mind rest in its most natural state. The wisdom, insight and clarity we gain at that time leads us to the real nature of our truth.

Until then, often we keep craving for experiences of a certain type. *Shiva Samhita* eloquently expounds on other hindrances that are neither physical nor mental, neither psychical nor emotional as such. No doubt all non-physical hurdles are mental obstacles in one way or the other but I specifically wish to list other hurdles separately so you get an idea of how a good meditator's focus is on un-conditioning of the self. With each step you take in cleansing yourself of your tendencies, desires and bookish knowledge, you get closer to the dawning of realization.

Hurdles of Gratification

When you meditate, especially if your meditation is part of a solitary retreat, everything you have enjoyed in your past comes back to you. It is distracting. You feel tempted to go back in the world and start living a life of material enjoyment again, you feel restless during your meditation. You miss your pleasures, interactions and lifestyle. Solitude and meditation can become depressing at that time. They start to gnaw you like mouse at a rope. The easiest way of clearing hindrances posed by past memories or desires of enjoyment is to simply stay focused. Allow them to pass. Ultimately, they all are thoughts. If you

don’t hanker after them, they will leave you so you can stay firmly established in your meditation and your meditative state.

Shiva Samhita, an ancient yogic text, lists the following hurdles of gratification.

> Women, beds, seats, dresses, and riches are obstacles to Yoga. Betels, dainty dishes, carriages, kingdoms, lordliness and powers; gold, silver, as well as copper, gems, aloe wood, and kine; the Vedas and Sastras; dancing, singing and ornaments; harp, flute and drum; riding on elephants and horses; wives and children, worldly enjoyments; all these are so many impediments. These are the obstacles which arise from *bhoga* (enjoyment).[54]

This list does not mean that a practitioner can never enjoy his or life. On the contrary, life must be lived to the fullest. Nor must this list be taken literally. What it does mean though is that someone who is at the beginning stage of his journey should keep his life as simple as possible. This reduces the number of distractions. As it is, meditation isn’t exactly a walk in the park. Once you have reached a certain stage in your practice, these hurdles will cease to be obstacles on the path. They don’t distract or affect an adept any more than a jasmine bud would hurt an elephant.

Hurdles of Religion

Often I meet people who are reluctant to adopt good practices just because they belong to a different religion. This is one of the hardest hurdles to overcome. From the moment we are born, we are fed with religious information in one way or the other. We form our concepts around God, realization, the nature of this world, good or bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral based on what our religion tells us.

A good meditator puts his religious practices on hold during the intense practice of meditation. Most religions recommend certain actions to be pleasing to God or a ticket to heaven and they also label many acts as sins. Meditation is not one of them. It is not done to gain a place in heaven or to acquire any religious merit. The sole purpose is to wipe your mind clean of its inherent tendencies so you may write a new story. Anything that conditions the mind will eventually become a distraction in meditation. From that perspective, religion is but a hindrance for a serious meditator.

> The following are the obstacles which dharma interposes: ablutions, worship of deities, observing the sacred days of the moon, fire sacrifice, hankering after vows and penances, fasts, religious observances, silence, the ascetic practices, contemplation and the object of

> contemplation, and alms- giving, world-wide fame, excavating and endowing of tanks, wells, ponds, convents and groves: sacrifices, vows of starvation, *Chandrayana*, and pilgrimages.[55]

Meditation in its purest sense has absolutely no connection with any religion. It does not insist in following any book, belief or God. As I wrote earlier, any thought (other than what you are meditating on), any emotion, any belief is simply a distraction. Sometimes, often in fact, our knowledge becomes a hurdle too.

Hurdles of Knowledge

Arjuna questioned Krishna on the battlefield saying that war was not the way to go and that it would result in bloodshed. Krishna, in reply, said:

> *yadātemoha-kalilaṁbuddhirvyatitariṣyati,*
> *tadāgantāsinirvedaṁśrotavyasyaśrutasya ca.*[56]
>
> Your intelligence is lost in the forest of delusion, Arjuna. You've read too many books and heard too many sermons. Your knowledge is not your own. You will only realize the truth when you get past second-hand knowledge.

When we let our mind rest in its most natural state, the stream of primal consciousness flows unimpeded. Until then, all knowledge acquired from secondary sources remains a hurdle.

> Now I shall describe, O Parvati, the obstacles which arise from knowledge. Sitting in the *Gomukh* posture and practising *Dhauti* (washing the intestines by Hatha Yoga). Knowledge of the distribution of the *nadis* (the vessels of the human body), learning of *pratyahara* (subjugation of the senses), trying to awaken the kundalini force, by moving quickly the belly (a process of Hatha Yoga), entering into the path of the senses, and knowledge of the action of the *Nadis*; these are the obstacles.[57]

This is a clever verse. I have personally known many seekers who link fitness of the body or asanas, postures, with direct realization. This is a grave mistake. How long you can hold your breath, how well you can bend your body, how clear is your nose – these may add to your physical fitness but have no direct relation to the insight that dawns from meditation. During my own journey, I never bothered with any of these. There was a short period of time when I practised postures to get rid of the pain but nothing beyond that. I simply meditated. Day and night, that's all I did, meditation. Everything else, many yogic feats, simply followed on their own. It is important to be free of concepts and conceptualization. As a meditator you must rise above all definitions and

beliefs passed down to you. Simply let the truth dawn on you in its purest form.

If you are committed to practice, everything becomes very simple. Sit down and build concentration on the object of your focus or contemplate with mindfulness. When you do that, you will run into obstacles, distractions, hindrances, hurdles. Gently bring your focus back to your object of meditation. This is the whole science of meditation, the rest is commentary.

Seven Yogic Practices

- ✧ Focus
- ✧ Still Gazing
- ✧ Listening
- ✧ Resolve
- ✧ Silence
- ✧ Solitude
- ✧ Letting Go

In this section, I share with you seven yogic practices you can use to progress on the path of meditation. If you are unable to concentrate while meditating what can you do to overcome that? The yogic practices listed here can be practiced by anyone. These can be done during the course of your normal routine. When you undertake any of the practices, try to do it for a continuous stretch of six weeks. Neuroscience says that when we keep doing something for six weeks, it creates a new neural pathway in our brain and it becomes a habit.

śucaudeśepratiṣṭhāpyasthiramāsanamātmanaḥ,
nāty-ucchritaṁ nāti-nīcaṁcailājina-kuśottaram.

tatraikāgraṁ manaḥ kṛtvāyata-cittendriya-kriyaḥ,
upaviśyāsaneyuñjyādyogamātma-viśuddhaye.[58]

A genuine seeker should go to a favorable, secluded and clean place. There he should spread his meditation mat which should be neither too high nor too low. The yogi should sit firmly and practice yoga to purify his consciousness by fixating the mind, senses and activities on one point.

Ekagrata – Concentration

If Arjuna, the great archer and warrior, from the times of Krishna, was one of the five Pandava brothers. His immediate younger brother, Bhima, was a ravenous eater, almost a gobbler. Once it was a new moon night, it was dead dark, and Bhima felt really hungry in the middle of the night. He sneaked into the kitchen, managed to find food and condiments and started eating. He had been doing this ever since he was a kid. On this particular night, however, Arjuna was awake and he followed Bhima to the kitchen. When he saw his brother eating in such pitch darkness with perfect ease, it startled him.

He had an insight, “If Bhima can find his way to the kitchen and food, and eat in this dark as if it were broad daylight,” he thought, “why can’t I do the same with archery?”

Arjuna started practicing at night with great focus and perseverance. Later, it was this skill, of being able to shoot in the dark that allowed him to win an important battle against a formidable opponent called Jayratha.

The term is ēkāgratā, single-mindedness, for concentration. If I split this word for better understanding, it is comprised of ēk, one, and *agra*, proceed. It means to proceed with oneness, with focus, with synchronicity, in a channelized fashion. Imagine a rope-walker, he is doing the act with utmost one-pointed concentration. A momentary lapse in his concentration can cost him dearly. Just before you enter into the meditative state, a certain uninterrupted stillness is required for a reasonable period. If you can learn to concentrate, meditation happens effortlessly. Yogic texts are replete with exercises on the art of concentration and in many, if not most, terms concentration and meditation have been interchanged freely. In simple words, as you must know by now, concentration is the practice of fixating your mind on one single object. You can do so on a form, on your

breath, on a sound or anything else that appeals to you.

Even if you practice mindful or any other form of contemplative meditation, you will still benefit immensely from the practice of concentration. It improves your memory and contributes to the overall wellbeing of the brain. Our brain,

which is a muscle, gets a good workout from practicing concentration.

The most important point to remember here is that you must not engage in any intellectual examination while doing this exercise. Do not examine, appreciate, analyze or condemn your object of visualization. Just focus on the object and try your best to maintain your focus. Your mind is going to wander off every few seconds, bring it back. Do not hold long sessions of concentration initially. Instead, hold sharp, short, crisp and lucid sessions of no more than ten minutes each. You can gradually increase the duration. Sitting still for an hour while your mind is wandering off all the time will not bring results as quickly as you holding your posture and lucidity for ten minutes but practising rigorous concentration with utmost alertness.

How to Do It Right

It's best to sit in the standard yogic posture, with your legs crossed preferably.

The practice of concentration is almost identical to the practice of concentrative meditation with only one fundamental difference. When you practice concentrative meditation, you allow yourself to slip into a state of ascending consciousness. While doing the yogic practice of concentration, however, the sole focus is to improve the duration and quality of your concentration (which you can then use to enjoy better meditation).

The other important thing is that in concentrative meditation, you are allowed to take a break every now and then to rejuvenate yourself. You could meditate for five days in a row and then take a break over the weekend. In the yogic practice of concentration, absolutely no break is allowed. It must be done every single day without fail for at least 40 days in a row.

The chart below shows the important elements of this practice and their impact on the quality of your concentration.

The far left column shows the various aspects to ensure good practice – a still body, a still mind, alertness and lucidity. The 'description' column is self-explanatory. 'Weightage' here refers to how important the various aspects are in the overall practice. 'Impact' tells what happens if you fail to fulfil that aspect of the practice. When impact is shown in red, it means that as soon as you violate that particular criteria, ideally you should start again. Yellow bar means to be mindful and the green bar (not present in this practice) means it is normal and you can continue. As an analogy, think of a driving test. When you are behind the wheel with the testing officer next to you, it is clear that certain mistakes are

considered ‘Instant Failure’ items while there are other points where a degree of leniency is used. If you fail to indicate while turning, or fail to check your blind spot when changing lanes for example, your test is terminated right in that moment and you are asked to turn back. Whereas, if you are not vigilant in constantly checking your rear and side view mirrors and are only doing so intermittently, the testing officer will mark you down, but he or she may still give you the license. All practices henceforth will have items classified as “Instant Failure”, “Warning”, and “Need Improvement”. Under the Impact column in the table, Red means instant failure, Yellow are warning signs and Green are to be taken as areas for improvement.

PRACTISING CONCENTRATION

Type	*Description*	*Weightage*	*Impact*
Still Body	Abandoning all body movements	Forty per cent	Red
Still Mind	Constantly bringing your mind back to the object of focus	Forty per cent	Red
Alertness	Being aware of your object of meditation	Ten per cent	Yellow
Lucidity	Holding a clear and crisp session of concentration	Ten per cent	Yellow

For example, let’s say you hold a session of concentration for ten minutes. During those ten minutes, you should be alert, in one posture – still like a rock or tree, focusing keenly on the object of concentration and trying your utmost to maintain lucidity. Maintaining lucidity means that your mind may become dizzy, or the image of visualization has disappeared, or the sound of the mantra just got lost in distractions and deviations. At that time you remind yourself of your resolve to concentrate and bring back your mind to the object of concentration; this is lucidity.

Let’s say during those ten minutes you move your limbs or torso; this is a red impact item and failing to keep your body still means you’ve compromised your practice. Reset the clock and start from the beginning. The same goes for still mind. It’ll be near impossible for beginner and intermediate meditators to keep their mind still for ten minutes. But, since this is a practice, every attempt should

be made to maintain alertness and lucidity so you may shift your attention back to the object of concentration every time your mind wanders off. If you realize that your mind had wondered off for more than a few minutes and you hadn’t even noticed, be honest with yourself, reset the clock and start your practice from the beginning.

If you find lapses in alertness and lucidity (yellow-impact items) while practising concentration, although it greatly affects your practice, gently be mindful and continue your practice. Unlike the red-impact items, you don’t have to stop your practice.

The important thing is to do it for at least 40 days without missing any day in between. You can also maintain a daily journal where you could mark yourself against the criteria of still body, still mind, alertness and lucidity. That way you will be able to measure the improvements in your practice.

Think of a champion vaulter. His score depends on his ability to hold the pole at perfect angle, run at perfect speed and to lift from the ground at perfect time to jump higher than the bar. For that one perfect performance, he has to jump thousands of times. He must have made countless mistakes while practising to deliver that one flawless performance in the competition.

Meditation is your performance on field where as a yogic practice is your trial runs off-field. Concentrative meditation is what you do flawlessly after you have corrected your mistakes in the practice of concentration.

Think of the time you tried to put a thread through the needle.

That was one pointed concentration. You were alert, focused, clear and still. Moment after moment, when you mentally maintain the same clarity, stillness and alertness, you meditate flawlessly.

Nirvṛikṣagiribhittyādidēśē dṛṣṭiṁ vinikṣipēt,
Vilīnē mānasē bhāvē vṛttikṣīṇaḥ prajāyatē.[59]

One should fix his gaze on a treeless place, like bare mountains or rocks, where there is no support for the mind to dwell on. Then the modifications of the mind become less and the experience of dissolution takes place.

Trataka – Still Gazing

Many years ago, someone who used to work for me was struggling with poor memory. He wanted to be alert and disciplined but it was almost like laziness was a disease and he was suffering from it. Not in the physical sense because he was out and about working on stuff all the time but there was no productivity, focus or any significant output. We (him and I) figured he severely lacked focus.

I told him to practice *trataka* for three months every day. It would help him with his memory and focus. He followed the instructions diligently and at the end of three months, there was remarkable improvement in his memory and recall. But, memory improvement wasn't the main thing. As a result of the practice, another, totally unexpected, thing happened. He reported a blurred vision in spite of wearing spectacles. He went to the optometrist only to find out that he no longer needed the prescription glasses (for short-sightedness or myopia). He had been wearing glasses for more than a decade.

I've observed on numerous occasions that yogic practices do channelize the flow of various energies in the body. It changes your gaze, gait and movements. It even affects your speech in its own positive way. You slow down a bit but become more effective, more mindful.

An unfailing sign of a true yogi is stillness of the gaze. Even some advanced meditators struggle to keep their eyeballs still (even when their eyes are closed). Stillness of the gaze has a remarkable effect on the energy flow in your body.

There is a specific yogic practice to perfect your gaze. The method of fixing your gaze on an object is called *trāṭaka*.

Movement in the eyes, flickering of the eyelids represent a subtle flaw in your posture as well as meditation. Practice of *trataka* is the best practice to eliminate this flaw. Like all other yogic practices, do it every day for at least 40 days to benefit from it.

How to Do It Right

1. Assume the standard yogic posture for meditation, preferably cross-legged.
2. Light a candle, at a distance of about three feet, in front of you. You can also keep any other object than a candle if you prefer.
3. Ensure the candle or any other object of focus is at your eye-level.
4. Watch it unblinking for a minimum of seven minutes. You can gradually increase the duration.
5. During the actual practice, try to be aware of your wandering thoughts and gently bring your mind back to the object.

Please see the chart below:

PRACTICING STILL GAZING

Type	*Description*	*Weightage*	*Impact*
Still Body	Abandoning all body movements	Thirty per cent	Red
Still Gaze	Fixing your eyes on the object of focus	Thirty per cent	Red
Blinking	Doing the practice unblinking	Thirty per cent	Yellow
Thought Flow	Maintaining focus & checking thought flow for better quality	Ten per cent	Green

You will notice that still body and still gaze are red impact items, which means if you move your body or shift your gaze while practising *trataka*; that is instant failure. Reset the clock and start again. If you are unable to control your eye movement and end up blinking, it's not a problem, simply be mindful and carry on. You may experience your thoughts flow. Ideally it should be restricted but it is natural and a green impact item, which means you don't have to stop your practice.

Let us say you decide to do *trataka* for a period of seven minutes. For those seven minutes, you must be still like a rock restricting your eye movements as well. It is important to not blink at all. Tears will start to roll down, but you should stay unmoved. If it gets really uncomfortable, you can blink. The ability

to not blink improves over time and with practice.

Each time your mind goes off the tangent, bring your focus back to the object. You can do *trataka* on any object, but doing it on a candle flame has a purifying effect on the mind. It is best to do the practice at least twice a day: in the morning and before going to bed at night. Steadily and gradually increase your ability to stay unblinking as part of this practice. It requires patience and resolve.

The right practice of *trataka* helps one still the mind and calm it down. It acts as a catalyst in building one-pointed concentration with better memory retention and recall. However, these are not the only benefits. As stated earlier in this book, your body is run by ten different energies, five primary and five secondary. The five secondary ones are called *nāga*, *kūrma*, *kr̥kara*, *dēvadatta* and *dhanañjaya*; they are responsible for belching, sneezing, blinking, yawning and twitching respectively.

The practice of *trataka* stills the five secondary energies giving you control over the aforesaid involuntary functions of the body. Such control is necessary for the advanced seeker who wishes to enjoy uninterrupted tranquil equipoise. During meditation, if any of the above five occurs, an awareness of the body emerges instantly, abruptly breaking the state of oneness.

The practice of *trataka* is the easiest way of introducing anyone to the practice of meditation, even kids above the age of six years. As they experience a certain stillness and calm from still gazing, they would automatically be drawn to the beauty of meditation.

athanāda-anusandhānamabhyāsa-anukramohaṭhe.
brahmacārīmitāhārītyāgī yoga-parāyaṇaḥ,
abdādūrdhvaṁbhavetsiddhonātrakāryāvicāraṇā.[60]

Then comes concentration on the sound. This is the sequence of practice... by regular and close attention to *nada*, sound, (*anahatanada* – unstruck sound) in Hatha Yoga, a devoted aspirant, eating frugally and living with detachment, gains success, no doubt, within a year.

Shravana – Listening

A **customer walked into** McDonald's and said, "One large fries to go, please!" "Would you like fries with that?" "I just asked for fries only."

"Oh, sorry about that. Would you like to upgrade?"

"But, I already ordered large fries!" the customer said frustrated. "Of course! Dine in or take-away…"

In our highly distracted world, most of us are hearing alright but very few are listening. Listening is an art and there's a yogic practice to perfect this art. At its root, even being alert in meditation is nothing but carefully listening to your mind.

The Sanskrit term is śrāva*ṇa*. It means to listen. The practice of listeningis a simple and powerful way to build your concentration.

The one who practices the art of listening undergoes a rapid transformation in their ability to remain concentrated.

Listening requires that you be alert and attentive in the present moment. Let us say you are attending a lecture in some class on Marketing. If you are not paying attention, in other words not listening, to what the lecturer is saying, sitting in the class is anything but useful. To know what the teacher is saying, you have to listen, and in order to listen, you have to pay attention. That is concentration.

A man approached Buddha once and said, "I want to become wise. Please tell me how do I operate better in the world? What do I do to not mess my relationships?"

Buddha spoke, "It is very simple. You only have to be mindful of two things – listen attentively to others when they are talking and even more attentively to yourself when you are talking."

The practice of listening does not require that you sit in a meditative posture. You can do it multiple times in a day. You could even do it while driving or commuting.

How to Do It Right

1. Put on your favorite song, at home, while driving, jogging, anywhere.
2. Promise yourself that you'll pay full attention to the song.
3. Listen to the song with complete mindfulness and alertness.

This is the art of active listening. This is the practice in anutshell. Put on your favorite song and make it a point to listen to every word in that song. It is not as easy it sounds though. How many times have you found yourself playing your favorite song with the intention to listen to it fully only to find a few minutes later that the song has already finished? You probably replay the song to hear it again.

Even with the most melodious song, it takes certain training for the mind to stay at it. You may listen to the whole of the first stanza, parts of the second stanza but somewhere in between the first and the last, your mind wanders off. You stand unaware. In the practice of listening, bring the act of listening to the forefront of your mind. You do that by listening attentively. When practicing listening, avoid leaving it playing in the background; doing that will actually weaken and dilute your concentration. Just putting on music and not listening to it makes your mind used to living with noise.

Many put their headphones on and start reading a book. If you ask them five hours later, chances are they are unable to recall the reading in detail or the songs they played. If you train your mind to live with diluted concentration, meditation, and subsequently tranquility, becomes increasingly harder.

In the older days, when there were no headphones or portable music systems, people would put on music and the only act they would do was to listen to that music. While reading, they would only read. Multitasking, the mantra of today's world, plays havoc on your concentration. Once you learn to do a single task properly, doing many things at once will become easier and effective. And, if you think you can multitask, try juggling with three oranges.

Concentration without meditation is pointless and meditation without concentration is useless. Both are not possible without mastering the art of listening. Whether that's listening to external sound or inner noise, outer world or inner thoughts, it's all the same.

tīvrasanvēgānāmāsannaḥ,[61]

The one who is firmly established in his practices with vigour and intensity reaches his goal before long.

Sankalpa – Resolve

I once heard this story about a man who brought the same sandwich for lunch to work, every day. In the staff cafeteria, he would open his lunch box, unwrap the two sandwiches of cheese and tomato. He would heat them up in the microwave and eat them with a cup of coffee. Day in day out, for more than four years, his colleagues observed that he brought the same lunch every day. Some even offered him theirs but he would always politely decline.

Four years later, a note was sent to the entire staff that this man had resigned and that in the evening there would be a farewell party for him. That day, he didn't bring his usual tiffin but a full meal with two *chapatis*, rice, two curries, pickle and a *laddoo*. His colleagues were intrigued. They asked him at the farewell about why he had the same lunch for four years and a different one today. Was he celebrating leaving the company?

"Four years ago," the man said, "I'd decided that I wanted to be a full-time writer. I began working on my novel. I vowed to eat the same boring lunch every day to remind myself that if I wanted a better tiffin, I needed to get published. Four years, diligently, I worked on my book. Yesterday, a publisher offered me a publishing contract with a handsome author's advance."

The singular most important, by far the most significant quality that a meditator must have is willpower, the resolve to not give up in the face of challenges. Irrespective of what path you are on, your determination to persist and persevere, your resolve to tread the path, determines the outcome.

The Sanskrit term for a vow, for a resolution is *saṅkalpa*. When you take a decision, a stand, you have taken a *sankalpa*. The practice of *sankalpa* strengthens your willpower like no other.

A critical point to note is that you need not give up or take vows that extend your whole lifetime.. Those vows are often unnecessary and unnatural. While practising *sankalpa*, like all other yogic practices, vow to do something (or not do it) for an initial period of 40 days. Thereafter, you can decide if you want to repeat or carry on with them forever.

Think of passing an entrance examination, say for securing a place in a

prestigious institution, in a much sought-after course. You ought to prepare keenly. You may take things a little lightly once you are in, but initially you have to work hard. The quality, discipline, intensity of your preparation directly affects the outcome. It is the difference between failure and success.

The same applies to the yogic practice of *sankalpa*. Once you have kept your resolve for the set period, you can go a little easy thereafter. During the period of your practice, however, it is paramount that you don't waiver. When you keep your resolutions, something amazing happens: your mind starts to listen to you a lot more, almost as if it understands that it's in the hands of a determined individual. If you vow to do something but let it go without a determined and monumental effort, you will really struggle to keep any resolution you make the next time.

How to Do It Right

The only mantra for successfully keeping the practice of *sankalpa* is to not give up, no matter what.

Let us assume you vow to sit still for 30 minutes every day for the next 40 days. You decide to sit still like a rock in the same posture for those 30 minutes no matter what. For that half hour, with great will power and determination, you are going to build your concentration with great mindfulness. You are going to make every attempt to remember that during the hour of your practice, each time your mind wanders off, you will gently bring it back to your object of focus.

A certain degree of determination is required to do the aforesaid. As you progress with resolve, you will find your conditioned mind becoming feeble. You will experience an inexplicable inner strength. Such new found strength will enable you to reach *sahaja*, an emergent natural state of bliss ultimately. During your period of *sankalpa*, if you miss your practice even once, it is a hundred percent breach of practice and requires restarting. As part of the practice, you can resolve to do anything at all. Sitting still is merely one example.

A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. Unless of course, you are taking the chartered flight. Remember though, in the dense forest of desires, in the deep ocean of proclivities of the conditioned soul, in the endless and baseless sky of expectations, no plane can land. The discipline to keep your resolve gives you the wings of confidence and wisdom to soar high.

manaḥprasādaḥsaumyatvaṃmaunamātmavinigrahaḥ,
bhāvasaṃśuddhirityetattapomānasamucyate.[62]

A cheerful disposition, even temperament, self-reflection and contemplation, with the practice of silence and self-purification is penance of the mind.

Mauna - Silence

The most beautiful music in your life will come from sublime silence. It is the melody of the soul. During my days of intense practice, I was in complete solitude and silence for 100 days. Those 100 days were the most beautiful days of my monk's life. There was only the sound of silence. In that silence, meditation happens almost effortlessly, wisdom dawns naturally, harmony arises automatically.

The practice of observing silence is called *mauna* in Sanskrit.

Silence of the speech leads to silence of the mind.

Human mind is always talking. It is not possible to listen to your mind if you are talking as well. It is, furthermore, impossible to quiet your mind if you are not paying attention to what it is saying. And, in order to listen to your mind, you must be quiet. Quietude of the speech is paramount to experience complete silence of the mind.

As part of the practice of silence, you need to start with small periods first. The shortest being at least one straight stretch of 24 hours. If you are merely observing silence of the speech by refraining from speaking, you are only 50 percent there.

How to Do It Right

The practice involves observing complete silence. That means, not holding any type of conversation. Please see the chart below:

PRACTISING TO LISTEN

Type	*Description*	*Weightage*	*Impact*
Interaction	Face-to-face	Fifty per cent	Red
Emails	Written conversations: emails, text messages, chat	Twenty per cent	Yellow
Gestures	Gesticulating to elicit response or convey a message	Ten per cent	Yellow
TV	Watching Television, listening to music, etc.	Ten per cent	Red
Interactive	Playing games, web surfing, or other interactive activities	Five per cent	Red
Reading`	Reading Newspaper, books, or other reading material	Five per cent	Green

For instance, you undertake the practice of observing silence for two days or 48 hours. Any face-to-face verbal interaction, watching TV, playing video games or engaging in other interactive activities are red impact items. They signify instant failure. If you do that, it means reset the clock and begin your practice from the beginning.

If you end up reading newspaper etc. during those two days, the quality of your practice comes down by five percent (see the weightage column) but you can still continue because it is a ‘green’ mistake.

During your period of silence, you can at the most take one book at the beginning. But ideally, you should just be in a room in your own company. If you end up sleeping for 18 out of 24 hours just because you can or because you have nothing else to do, you need not bother with observing silence business. It is wasting your time. After all, we are not observing sleep but silence.

The more mindful and alert you are, the better your practice. When in complete silence, you start to become aware of the talkative nature of your mind. You begin to see how your mind is restless like the baboon that cannot stay on any branch longer than a few seconds.

Initially, your ability to meditate is going to retard while observing silence. You are likely to experience a certain restlessness as well. It is only natural. With persistence and patience, a quietude begins to dawn. And that is going to get you ready for good meditation. Observing silence is comparable to preparing a fertile ground to sow the seeds of meditation.

The practice of observing silence is absolutely critical for the seeker desiring to reach the ultimate state. When you are enjoying yourself listening to your iPod, the external noise seems to subside automatically. The music in your ears makes the outside sound almost immaterial. Similarly, when you are able to channelize internal noise, it transforms into music. And when you start to hear your inner music, everything offered to you in the external world almost ceases to matter.

A good practice of silence does not have any dialogues, conversations – written or oral, gestures, interactions or engagements. *Mauna* is not merely restraint of speech, it is quieting your actions, speech and thoughts.

yogīyuñjītasatatamātmānaṁ rahasisthitaḥ,
ekākīyata-cittātmānirāśīraparigrahaḥ.[63]

Free from attachment and possessiveness, a sincere yogi should choose a place of solitude and diligently work towards his own emancipation.

Ekanta – Solitude

A **woman said to** another, “My husband is so touchy. No matter how much I try to avoid, the slightest thing sets him off.”

“Still not bad, I tell you,” the other said, “mine is a self-starter.”

The mind too is a self-starter. It knows how to ruin perfect moments by going off on its own.

If you truly wish to discover yourself, you must learn to live in solitude. I can promise you that your truth will dawn on you only in silence and solitude.

The Sanskrit term for solitude is *ekānta*. It is the hallmark of a person who has turned inward – their love for solitude. An unmistakable sign of a restless mind is its inability to embrace solitude. For the quiet mind nothing is as profound as solitude and for the restless, nothing is more terrifying.

There are only two types of people who are comfortable in solitude: the lazy and the yogi. The former lacks awareness while the latter radiates with it.

By solitude, I do not mean that you live in a remote place but have access to TV, books, internet and the rest of it. By solitude, I mean that you are just by yourself. You in your own company.

The only person you have to talk to you is you, the only person you have to listen to is you, the only person around is you. The only object of engagement for your mind is you. When you are bored, you go back to yourself and when you are happy, you share it with yourself. During the practice of solitude, you do not even see others, let alone meet them or talk to them. The only person you get to see is you.

Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita,

> *Ātmanayēvātmanātuṣṭaḥstithprajñastaducaytē* [64]
>
> The one who dwells within and is contented within is indeed a yogi. The seeker who has turned inward finds greatest bliss in solitude. In such a state, he can uninterruptedly enjoy the bliss within.

If you are in solitude and have engaged your mind in reading, writing or other

similar activities, that is still solitude. It is not the finest type though, it is more like pseudo solitude. The ultimate solitude is when you are aware of each passing moment, you are not dull and you are not sleepy, you are awake and alert, and, at that, you do not feel restless; you do not feel the urge to always do "something". You are at peace within. When you are face-to- face with your own mind, sharply looking at it directly, you are in solitude. A yogi who has mastered the art of living in solitude, without fail, will always be in solitude even amidst the greatest crowd. His quietude remains unaffected by the noise outside. His inner world stays insulated from the outer one.

In solitude, after initial periods of restlessness and stupor, bliss starts to flow through your very being. Everything becomes still. Your mind, senses, body, surroundings, flowing river, waterfalls – absolutely everything becomes still. *Anahatnada*, unstruck sound and beautiful other sounds start to manifest themselves. However, they can cause a deviation. A good meditator continues to stay disciplined and focused. Living in solitude requires great discipline. With self-discipline, you can achieve just about anything you can imagine. Disciplined living in solitude is *tapas*, an austerity, in its own right. It is the quickest way of self-cleansing.

Patanjali states in his aphorisms,

> *Kāyēndriyasid'dhiḥaśud'dhikṣyātatapasaḥ*,[65]
>
> Self-discipline burns away all afflictions and impurities.

This has been my personal experience as well. Solitude teaches you without preaching.

Yogic and tantric texts lay great emphasis on acquiring the ability and stillness to live in solitude. The great Tibetan Yogi Jetsun Milarepa devoted his whole life carrying out the instructions of his guru by meditating in terrifying solitude on forbidden peaks. He was once invited by his female disciples to their village for preaching. Their argument predominantly being that Milarepa's presence and grace, with his vast store of *tapas*, would help the humanity, especially if he could be among and around them in cities and villages. Milarepa, however, committed to the practice of meditation, replied, "Practicing meditation in solitude is, in itself, a service to the people. Although my mind no longer changes, it is still a good tradition for a great yogi to remain in solitude."[66]

How to Do It Right

The practice of solitude, naturally, incorporates the practice of observing silence as well. You can start your stint of solitude, by opting for short periods first with a minimum stretch of 24 hours. For towners, it is extremely hard to find solitude. To begin with, you can find yourself a quiet room and lock yourself in it for a day or so. Take frugal provisions with you. Your room should ideally have an attached washroom. Please be aware that this is beginner's level. Gradually and steadily, the intensity of solitude is increased by practising it in truly isolated places and secluded spots. My own experience says that as you progress, Nature arranges everything for you, including the spots for such meditation.

Please see the chart below.

PRACTISING SOLITUDE

Type	*Description*	*Weightage*	*Impact*
Solitude	Being alone with no one else around you	Fifty per cent	Red
Conversations	Written conversations: emails, text messages, chat	Twenty per cent	Red
Television	Watching Television, listening to music, etc	Fifteen per cent	Red
Interactive	Playing online or computer games, web surfing, etc	Ten per cent	Red
Reading`	Reading Newspaper, books, or other reading material	Five per cent	Green

During your practice of solitude, having any company or coming face-to-face with anyone is an instant failure. That nullifies your practice of solitude. You need to start again. The same goes for interactions, watching TV and web surfing. The practice of solitude is even stricter than the practice of observing silence.

The only discount you have is the allowance to read something. Although that too affects your solitude but it is still acceptable.

The goal is to learn to have your mind free of all engagements. A free mind is the only true freedom anyone can ever have.

nāhīdēhabhṛtāśakyaṁtyaktuṁkarmāṇyaśēṣataḥ,
yastukarmaphalatyāgīsatyāgītyabhidhīyatē.
sańkalpa-prabhavānkāmāṁstyaktvāsarvānaśeṣataḥ,
manasaivendriya-grāmaṁviniyamyasamantataḥ.[67]

As long as one is in the body, it is impossible to give up activities completely. It is when one is detached and unhitched towards the outcome that one is true yogi. One should abandon, without exception, all material desires born of mental speculation and thus control all the senses on all sides by the mind.

Tyaga – Letting Go

In a monastery once, a master was preaching forgiveness. A few disciples argued that while letting go was the finest act, it was hard. They wondered what the harm in holding onto certain feelings was, especially if it did not hinder their meditation. The master listened patiently. He asked them to take a handful of potatoes, engrave the initials of the person they could not or did not want to forgive; one potato per person. He further instructed them to put their potatoes in a bag, bring them to the class and take them back to their quarters every day.

The disciples followed the instructions and everyone carried a bag the next day. Some were carrying bags bigger than others. A week went by, the monks felt ludicrous carrying their sacks around. The potatoes started to rot and stink. They asked their master for how long were they supposed to do the exercise. They complained that it was becoming unbearable to put up with the stench and unnecessary weight.

“So, what have you learned?” the master asked.

“Potatoes are our negative emotions. Holding onto them is carrying burden and stench,” they replied.

“Exactly. But, can you carry potatoes without the bag?” the sage spoke. “If potatoes are your negative feelings, what is the bag?”

Pin drop silence ensued. It happens at the dawning of wisdom. They understood the bag was their mind.

It’s incredible how much garbage we keep within us as if we are attached to the stench of our rotten potatoes. No one I know wants to be unhappy. They want to let go and move on but find it extremely difficult to do so. This is where the practice of letting go comes handy. If you consciously train your mind to let go, you can use this skill to drop any emotion.

We all have our attachments and they are the root cause of most of our disappointments. We may like to believe that we remain unaffected or that our love is pure, devoid of attachments to people or things. The truth is, your degree of detachment can only be ascertained once you are removed from the object of

your attachment.

There is a specific yogic practice to help you in cultivating the art of letting go.

The word is *tyāga* in Sanskrit. It means to let go, to give up, to renounce, to detach, to set (yourself) free from the attachment to the object. The practice of *tyaga* is a powerful one and the effect is profound. It is capable of igniting a radical transformation in you.

Detachment or letting go is not an automatic act. A fair bit of groundwork is required before one can acquire such state of dispassion and abandon where it comes naturally to them. A fitting question here is, “What is that groundwork?” The practice of *tyaga* is the groundwork.

Like everything else, detachment can be learned. For the purpose of better understanding and to make this a tangible practice, I am going to segregate the practice in to two parts. First is letting go of physical objects; this strengthens one’s mind. The second is letting go of thoughts or emotions. I’m only elaborating on the first one (letting go of physical objects) because if you meditate correctly, you’ll develop your own wisdom and method to let go of undesirable thoughts and emotions.

How to Do It Right

Start giving up whatever you like. Essentially, that is the practice; start giving up. So, should you give up your car, house, belongings and so forth? Not at all. The attachment is generally not with the object, it is with the pleasure you get from such object, with the value you place on it. You are not attached to tea but the pleasure you get from drinking tea. So, if you are willing to part with the joy you get from drinking tea, the habit of drinking tea will leave you effortlessly.

The practice of letting go starts with identifying what you love the most and then picking one to begin with, deciding to let go for a certain period. It can be one week, a month, one year or any other duration you decide. Please see the chart below:

Practising to Let Go

Type	*Description*	*Weightage*	*Impact*
Consumption	Refraining from using or consuming the object	Sixty per cent	Red
Desire	Continuously desiring the object of abandonment	Twenty per cent	Yellow
Contemplation	Contemplating on the object	Fifteen per cent	Yellow
Thoughts	Random thoughts of the object	Five per cent	Green

The complete practice of *tyaga* means abandoning consumption, desire, contemplation and thoughts of the object of attachment. In line with the framework tabulated above, let me elaborate the practice with an example.

Let's say you love drinking coffee. Your favourite is cappuccino. For the last so many years, you have been routinely having your double shot cappuccino. You have gotten used to it. On days you cannot get your hands on your coffee, you miss it. Perhaps, you even get a headache if you are unable to get your dose of caffeine. This is attachment; it strips you of your freedom and makes you dependent. One day, committing yourself to the practice of *tyaga* you decide to give up coffee for a period of forty days. During those forty days, if you:

1. Consuming coffee even once (consumption row in the table above) is a breach of your practice. The impact is red. It is an instant failure item. You need to restart.
2. Keep longing for coffee, this means you are unable to take your mind off coffee. You are curbing your desire. Your practice continues but it brings down the overall quality by twenty percent.
3. Keep contemplating on coffee, the desire for coffee will arise automatically. If only you remember to gently take your mind off and focus it elsewhere each time you think about coffee, you are doing good.
4. Think about coffee, which may emerge even at the sight of a cafe, or seeing someone drinking it, etc., is okay. The key is to drop the thought when it emerges. Having thoughts is natural. When you stay mindful of your practice and resolution, thoughts become feeble and harmless; they

disappear as soon as they emerge.

When you let go, you gain freedom. It further leads to a state of independence, peace and fulfilment. Ultimately, if you can let go of everything that gives you grief, every agonizing emotion, every discursive thought, you can well imagine your blissful state.

When you learn to let go, you are effectively learning to let yourself go free.

Monitoring Your Progress

- ✧ Self-Awareness Journal
- ✧ Meditation Journal

jākī rahī bhāvanā jaisī,
prabhu mūrata dekhī tina taisī.
siyārāma maya saba jaga jāni,
karahu pranāma jori juga pāṇī.[68]

You see in the world what's in your heart. As far as I'm concerned, I only see my glorious God seated everywhere and therefore I fold my hands and offer my respects to everyone, for that's all there is – God and goodness.

Self-Awareness Journal

Often we lose sight of the good in our lives simply because we are not consciously aware of it anymore. In facing our challenges and daily struggles, we forget that there's more to our life, more to us, than merely living from one day to the next. This self-awareness journal is to help you see where you are going (and if you want to go there) and what all you already have to be grateful for.

SELF-AWARENESS JOURNAL		
Day 1	I'm grateful for	1 2
	I can be a better person by	1 2
	I love myself because	1 2
	I would love to learn	
	If I could I would be	
Day 2	I'm grateful for	1 2
	I can be a better person by	1 2
	I love myself because	1 2
	I would love to learn	
	If I could I would be	

Day 40	I'm grateful for	1 2
	I can be a better person by	1 2
	I love myself because	1 2
	I would love to learn	
	If I could I would be	
SMILE. BREATHE. MEDITATE. LET GO.		

This simple journal has a powerful way of building self- awareness, positivity and gratitude in your life. You could fill it every day for 40 days or less as per your convenience. You can use the template above to put it in your diary or you can download a soft copy from my website (omswami.com).

For each day, there are five sections.

1. **I am grateful for:** There are two rows in this section. Think about the two things you are grateful for in your life and jot them down here. Try to list two new things every day.
2. **I can be a better person by**: Once again, there are two rows. Write down two habits you wish to develop. Even if you pen down the same two habits every day, you'll end up being more mindful. Gradually, your mind will start shifting towards those actions that are in line with your priorities.
3. **I love myself because:** Two reasons why you love yourself. It sounds easy but this section is where most participants have trouble in the meditation retreats I conduct. If you can list two new reasons every day, that will be simply marvellous.
4. **I would love to learn:** One skill you would love to learn. A skill you've always wanted to but never found the time to learn–playing piano, swimming, dancing, anything.
5. **If I could be I would be**: How would you live your life if there were no barriers? Who would you be? It'll be an insightful exercise, one that'll tell you what it is that you really want out of life.

Please fill this journal every day and review it at the end of your practice. It will bring about a subtle change in you as you'll find yourself more positive, calm and focused. The benefit of maintaining this journal is multiplied when you meditate regularly.

asaṁśayaṁ mahā-bāhomano durnigrahaṁ calam,
abhyāsena tu kaunteyavairāgyeṇa ca gṛhyate.[69]

There is no doubt, O Arjuna, says Krishna, that it's very difficult to tame the restless mind. But, it is possible with dispassion and practice.

Meditation Journal

For months, during my own intense practice, I meticulously maintained a journal of my meditation. It helped me see a pattern and understand if I was progressing on the path. At a glance I could see which hurdles bothered me more than others and if I maintained my state even when I wasn't meditating. This journal has three charts. The first one is to measure the quality of your meditation sessions. The second is to mark which blocks or hurdles are impeding your growth. And the third one is to see if you are maintaining virtues at other times even when you are not meditating. The charts here are merely templates and you can make your own guidelines from this or download a soft copy from my website.

Please see the first chart below:

1. It lists six aspects of meditation for each day and session.
2. Each day has three sessions, M = Morning; E = Evening; and N = Night (just before you go to bed). You are welcome to put only one or two sessions every day. Your session can be as long as you want but it's important to be consistent. To begin with you could do two or three 15-minute sessions.
3. The important thing to learn is how to mark yourself. For each aspect, at the end of your meditation, just reflect on it if you could maintain it and give a score accordingly. For example, throughout your session what was the quality of your concentration. If it was superb, give yourself a 7 out of 10, for instance.
4. The same goes for posture too. If you moved your limbs even once during that one session, deduct at least 4 marks. If you turned your head, deduct another 3 marks against posture. If you simply couldn't keep your gaze still but kept your posture intact, deduct only two marks. The same goes for mindfulness and alertness too.
5. If you had sit down thinking that you would've meditated for 10 minutes but got up after 5 minutes, it means that the 'duration' aspect was

compromised. Deduct at least 5 marks for this.

6. Pay attention to your mood and reflect on it after you complete the session. Could you maintain a smile, a joyous disposition? Score yourself based on how positive you were throughout your session.
7. Mark yourself at the end of each session.
8. At the end of 40 days, for example, or even two weeks, you can do a total of each segment and see what your strong points are.

QUALITY – DURING MEDITATION

Aspect *Rate: 1–10*	*Day 1*			*Day 2*			*Day X..*			*Day 40*			*Total*
	M	*A*	*E*	*M*	*A*	*E*	*M*	*A*	*E*	*M*	*A*	*E*	
Concentration													
Posture													
Mindfulness													
Alertness													
Duration													
Mood													
Total													

Just like we ranked each session of meditation for its quality, we need to do the same for the various hurdles. It'll help you see what's been causing the most problems in your session. Please see the chart below:

Blocks – During Meditation

Give a score against which blocks interfered with your meditation.
Higher score means bigger hurdle/block.

Block Rate: 1- 10	*Day 1*			*Day 2*			*Day X...*			*Day 40*			*Total*
	M	*A*	*E*	*M*	*A*	*E*	*M*	*A*	*E*	*M*	*A*	*E*	
Dullness													
Restlessness													
Emotions													
Thoughts													
Physical Pain													
Other reason													
Total													

1. Feel free to modify the template. If you only meditate twice or once a day, you can change it accordingly.
2. After each session of meditation, reflect on the quality of your meditation and mark which hurdles caused greatest distraction.
3. The bigger the hurdle, the greater the mark. For example, if your meditation was affected on account of feeling lazy, sleepy, dizzy, heavy or torpid, give yourself a high score under ‘dullness’.
4. See the table immediately after this chart to see how to ascertain which hurdle you should mark against.
5. It’s critical to fill this journal diligently because this is the easiest way to monitor and measure your progress.

See the table below to see which hurdles affected your session the most.

Mark under the appropriate block if your meditation is affected due to:	
Dullness	Includes feeling lazy, sleepy, dizzy, heavy or torpid.
Restlessness	Includes feeling excited, unrest, anxiety or uneasiness.
Emotions	Includes emotions of envy, hatred, jealousy, cravings, love, sensuality, lust, sadness, sorrow or any other.
Thoughts	Includes a wandering mind, random thoughts and images.
Physical Pain	Includes all forms of physical pain. Pay attention if your pain shifts each day or is in the same region. Use Notes to mention if your pain is due to a preexisting medical condition.
Other Reason	May include distractions such as external sounds, surroundings, feeling hot or cold, etc. Mention your reason in the notes.

Maintaining a meditative state even when you are not meditating is just as critical as doing it when you are actually in meditation. For this reason, a good meditator maintains certain virtues at all times. This is where you really know if you've been meditating correctly. This is how people will notice any change in you.

Please see the chart below:

1. Unlike the other two charts, this one does not have morning, evening and night but morning, afternoon and evening.
2. It lists five key virtues a good meditator ought to practice.
3. At the end of each day or after completing your session of meditation, you could reflect on the past few hours and see if you generally acted mindfully, compassionately, gratefully and with humility. Reflect and see if you practiced silence by refraining from engaging in pointless gossip or telling lies.
4. Every time you practice a virtue, it'll take you a step closer towards the final step.
5. Let's say you sit down at night to see if you lived your day according to the virtues today. If you spoke harsh words or acted recklessly (road rage, for example) in the morning, afternoon or evening, deduct marks

accordingly against that aspect. If you found yourself complaining about your life, for example, you were not being grateful. If you were boasting, you did not practice humility and so on.

6. Meditation is pointless if it doesn't inspire you to lead a virtuous life.

Maintain at all Other Times

Aspect *Rate: 1- 10*	*Day 1*			*Day 2*			*Day X...*			*Day 40*			*Total*
	M	*A*	*E*	*M*	*A*	*E*	*M*	*A*	*E*	*M*	*A*	*E*	
Awareness													
Silence													
Compassion													
Gratitude													
Humility													
Total													

I've also put some guidelines in dos and don'ts for you. Please see the table below. You could also maintain a journal for each of the seven yogic practices. It really helps in ascertaining how sincerely we've been carrying out the practice.

Other Guidelines

DO	1	Maintain a gentle smile while meditating.
	2	Be sincere and conservative in marking yourself.
	3	Practice mental exertion when you experience dullness.
	4	Practice mental relaxation when you experience restless.
	5	Breathe deep. Whenever feeling restless, dull, lazy, angry, anxious, just breathe deeply.
	6	Practice. Practice. Practice.

DON'T	1	Sleep without meditating. Do not go to sleep without meditating for at least ten minutes.
	2	Battle or resist your emotions or thoughts. When they come unwanted, gently shift your attention elsewhere or bring it back to your object of concentration if you are meditating.
	3	Cling to anyone. If you won't cling, you won't experience envy, jealousy or hatred.
	4	Give up. If you are serious about experiencing the transcendental state, don't give up.
REMEMBER	1	Ultimately, meditation is letting your mind rest in its most natural state. A state of pure bliss.
	2	To experience and retain the blissful state of a quiet mind, you must not forego the virtues.
	3	Improvements in meditation come gradually, in tiny, immeasurable units.
	4	Lucid, even if short, sessions of meditation are more effective than long and dull ones.
	5	Everything around you, your body included, is temporary. It's transient.
SMILE. BREATHE. MEDITATE. LET GO.		

Meditation in a Nutshell

- The Two Paths
- Silence and Awareness
- Mental Exertion and Relaxation

mridumadhyādhimātrātatōapiviśēṣaḥ.[70]

Results vary according to the intensity. There are mild, average and keen practitioners.

The Two Paths

A **master instructed his** disciple to meditate for six hours every day and do so for 10 years.

“What if I meditate for 12 hours every day?” the disciple asked. “How long will it take to reach the goal then?”

“Twenty years.”

“Really? And what if I meditate for 18 hours in a day?” “Thirty years.”

“How can that be?”

“With one eye on the goal, you only have one left to focus on the task,” the master replied.

A sprinter must run with all his might and focus. He can’t afford to look at the finish line while running. If he remains on track and doesn’t stop running, he’ll cross the finish line. It’s not very different on the path of meditation either. Your goal is not to reach some state, that’ll happen on its own if you persist diligently. Your only goal is to ensure that you practice correctly.

The more sugar you put in, the sweeter it gets. When it comes to meditation, intensity in effort equals immensity in rewards. To that effect, you have two paths of meditation: the ordinary and the extraordinary.

The Ordinary Path

Ordinary does not mean that it’s not fruitful or effective. By ordinary, I’m simply referring to the traditional path. Once again, it entirely depends on the quality of your practice. Not everyone can leave everything behind and go into a Himalayan solitude to walk the path of self-realization. Not everyone can be a Buddha or a Mahavira in terms of their life choices. In any case, you won’t know till you walk the path. The day the spark of realization ignites in your heart, your life will change forever. For those who have responsibilities and other commitments, there is the traditional path.

There are scholars who enrol in PhD on a full-time basis. Completion of their doctorate is their only focus. They are done with their coursework and

dissertation within three years. Receiving their testamur and medal, they move on to apply their knowledge in the real world. And then you have some scholars who take five, even seven years, before they submit their thesis.

There's nothing to say or prove that the one who completed it in three years is qualitatively better than the other one. It boils down to individual temperament, priority and resources. On the ordinary path of meditation, a seeker can't devote all his or her time to just meditation. They are scholars from the latter category. They have other things to take care of –maybe a job, family, parents, or all of them. On the ordinary path, there are two types of meditators.

First is an average meditator, who holds three sessions of meditation in a span of 24 hours. Each session lasts about one hour. If they have been following this regime for a minimum of six months, they can be safely classified as average meditators.

The second is a mild meditator, who holds one or two sessions of meditation in a span of 24 hours, generally at dawn and dusk. The length of an average session of meditation for a mild practitioner is between 30 minutes to an hour.

If you put things in perspective, you'll realize that we spend over six hours in school for more than 12 years before we secure a place in a university. We spend another three or four years at the university to earn an undergraduate degree. After 16 years of continuous effort, we get a job that starts to provide a reward for our work. To earn that reward, however, we must work another eight hours at least five days a week.

When it comes to meditation, most people have unrealistic expectations. You can't start earning within six months. Like any other field of study or practice, this too has a specific path that requires years of effort. The only good news is that if you practice routinely as a matter of discipline, you'll start to see subtle changes in you within a span of six months.

The Extraordinary Path

Bill Gates once said, "I never took a day off in my twenties." The extraordinary path is for those who have found their calling in meditation, or for those who can't wait any longer to discover their own truth. These are the scholars who drop out of school and just go for it. It was the path of Buddha, Mahavira, Ramana Maharishi, Jesus Christ and even their disciples who dropped everything to serve their cause. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, who was a householder, walked the extraordinary path because with each passing moment

all he did was to immerse himself in the glories of the Goddess.

Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Issac Newton, Van Gogh – they all walked the extraordinary path in their respective fields. Nothing other than a single-minded pursuit of their vision (not necessarily goal) mattered to them. On the extraordinary path of meditation, there are two types of meditators: intense and keen.

An intense meditator is someone who holds an average of six sessions of meditation in a span of 24 hours and does so on a regular basis, minimum period being six months. Average session of such a meditator lasts between 60 and 90 minutes. Anything more than that is considered supremely intense.

A keen meditator is the one who meditates an average of four times in a span of 24 hours, each session lasting a minimum of one hour. A meditator who meditates unfailingly with this discipline for at least one year can be called a keen meditator and not just someone who does it for a few weeks.

This has been my own experience too, that, ultimately, if you are serious about experiencing the supreme bliss through meditation, sooner or later, you will have to intensify your practice.

You may ask, who has time to meditate for that long in this day and age? Just to give you some context, at the peak of my practice, for roughly seven months, I meditated for nearly 22 hours every day. Out of everything I had ever tried in my life, it was the most difficult and most exhausting endeavour I had ever undertaken. It was also the most rewarding, I may add. Naturally, I didn't start putting in the long hours from the word go; rather, built it up over several years. Clear results come through according to the quality, duration and intensity of your practice.

From Ordinary to Extraordinary

Most of what I've stated above applies to the practice of concentrative meditation, the kind that requires you to sit down in a specific posture and build your concentration. As you know by now, this is not the only type of meditation. There are many other options. And this is where I share the incredibly powerful practice of a mindful day.

In the practice of a mindful day, you could realize the benefits of intense and keen meditators without actually leaving for the Himalayas. You can elevate your consciousness to a degree beyond imagination for the average mind, all the while holding your job and comforts. This is the only practice I know on the path

of meditation that transforms an ordinary life into an extraordinary one. It is walking the ordinary path in the extraordinary way.

How to Do It Right

It's very simple but it's only with practice that you can perfect it. You don't have to sit in any yogic posture. Instead, carry on with your normal routine. It'll be like any other day but with one great difference – you'll do everything, every little act, with utmost mindfulness.

When you get up in the morning and brush your teeth, do it mindfully. Watch how you wet your brush, put the toothpaste on and brush. Feel every single stroke, realize how peppermint bursts against your taste buds and how you feel this freshness in your mouth.

When you step into the shower, experience the living energy in every single drop of water. Bathe mindfully. When you apply shampoo, facewash, conditioner and soap, etc., feel it. Be present in the moment. Think that you are bathing a divine body, as if you are offering ablutions in a sacred ritual.

When you sit down to have your breakfast, eat as if you are doing a *yajna*, as if you are making fire offerings to the divinity in you. When you work, drive, walk, talk, listen do so with mindfulness, by being present in the moment. Ask yourself the one most important question to bring yourself back into the present moment, "What am I doing right now?"

Initially, you'll keep forgetting that you are supposed to do everything mindfully. You may brush mindfully but by the time you reach breakfast, you maybe grabbing the sandwich, gulping scalding coffee and rushing through your front door. You may be agitatedly flicking FM channels while waiting in the peak hour traffic. It's alright. You can't change your lifestyle overnight, but you can be mindful. Every time you remember that you are not being mindful, you just ask yourself, "What am I doing right now?"

This is the easiest way of walking the extraordinary path while still living and enjoying the pleasures of this world. Over time, as you progress, your priorities will become clearer to you. You'll know what truly is worth treasuring and what all you should focus on. As they say, your heart is where your treasure is. As you find your treasure, you will have discovered your truth.

sahassamapicevacaanatthapadasajhita,
ekajatthapadajseyyoyajsutvaupasammati.[71]

Better than a thousand meaningless statements
Is one meaningful word
Which, having been heard,
Brings peace.

Silence and Awareness

A seeker approached a master who lived in extreme solitude. For tens of miles near his cave, there lived no one.

"You must feel really lonely here," the seeker said.

"Now that you are here, I'm lonely indeed," the master replied. "Earlier I was rejoicing in my own company."

Silence and awareness has an intimate relationship. It plays a crucial role in correct meditation. Silence of the mind is the outcome of a good meditation and silence of the speech is the hallmark of a great meditator.

Even if you can't be mindful, and you can't sit down and meditate, if you at least learn to be silent, you will most certainly progress on the path.

When we meditate, one of the greatest hurdles is our thoughts. Often thoughts take the form of conversations. Whatever you may have talked in the past keeps playing back in our head while you meditate. It's an irresistible urge – the urge to talk. If you look around you will find most people are talking most of the time. The urge to talk arises directly from the restless mind. Whether such talk is useful or useless, positive or negative is subject to individual interpretation.

At any point in time, the average human mind is engaging in one of the three forms of conversations.

Gross Conversations

All conversations held with others using words or gestures are gross conversations. Most of us spend the majority of our day engaging in gross conversations. This could be in the shape of writing emails, phone calls, in-person conversations and the like. While a lot of what we do may be required to operate in this world, most of it is unnecessary, in my view.

Gross conversations add to the unrest of the mind. A good way to start turning inward is to reduce the number of these conversations as much as possible. Given your personal, professional and social engagements, it may not be possible for you to cut down on these a great deal immediately but getting

started with resolve will unfold the path for you step-by-step.

Once you get used to staying quiet for long periods, you will experience certain quietude of the mind. That naturally diminishes the urge to talk. Next time you want to talk about weather, politics, etc., hold the urge for it is unlikely you will gain anything out of it, and, chances are that the other person is not actually listening to your point of view anyway. Most people are not really listening but simply waiting for the speaker to finish his point so they can begin theirs.

Mental Conversations

Whenyouare nottalking tosomeone, chances are, youare holding a communion with yourself. Thoughts when pursued are mental conversations. These do not allow your mind to rest and settle. Mental conversations are also the greatest hurdles in holding lucid sessions of meditation. We are so used to talking that when we are not talking to others, we are talking to ourselves. The unfailing sign of a restless mind is its inability to stay quiet. A mind that is brooding over matters, or a whining negative mind, a lustful passionate mind or a talkative restless mind are examples, triggers and boosters of mental conversations. The only two ways, of stopping these conversations are either engaging your mind elsewhere, which is a temporary fix, or quieting your mind, which is a permanent solution.

Mindfulness is the first step in putting a lid on mental conversations. Each time you find yourself holding a mental conversation, just be mindful. Ask yourself the golden question, “What am I doing right now?” A certain awareness will arise. Don’t try to stop a mental conversation by instructing yourself to stop it or by curbing it. Instead, stop it either by ignoring it or by shifting your attention.

Subtle Conversations

When you are neither talking to someone nor holding a self- communion, in great likelihood, you are holding a subtle conversation. Since the mind is unsettled and restless, you want to keep it engaged, almost involuntarily, just like the hyper and naughty kid the parents want to keep busy. Are you wondering what subtle conversations are? When you are not talking to anyone or to yourself but you are watching others converse, you are holding a subtle conversation.

Watching TV or listening to radio are examples of subtle conversations.

Stereotypically, without prejudice and justification, men do not hold the first two types of conversations as much as women, therefore, they often compensate by engaging more in the third one. You will find men glued to TV more than women and more frequently at that. The more restless the mind, the greater the flipping through channels. Reading a book is a more useful form of subtle conversation, because while reading your mind listens more than processing and directly engaging in an act of learning.

While meditating, sometimes conversations of other people keep playing in your head. By being a listener, you are effectively participating in that chat. That is an example of a subtle conversation too.

Conversations to Silence

An untamed mind must find an outlet and conversations provide exactly that. It is one of the reasons that sleep is relaxing. For, among benefits to the body, at least you are not aware of the talkative mind beyond recollection of their dreams. Is it any wonder that brain cells only get repaired during sleep? A good way to understand your reliance on subtle conversations is to make a resolution to not watch TV, read newspaper or listen to radio for a certain number of days.

The nature of conversations, material or spiritual, can have a temporary bearing on the state of your mind. Any conversation can be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The pleasant ones are the ones you find engaging and the unpleasant ones are the ones that you want to avoid. The neutral ones can swing either way depending on your interest. Interest in any conversation is the direct result of the conditioning of the mind. Someone who has conditioned his mind with repositories of information on politics or automobiles will find those topics interesting compared to those who may be more interested in fine arts or literature, for instance.

In any case, a sincere seeker should avoid harsh, useless, meaningless and abusive speech. Unrestrained speech and bogus conversations play a havoc on the quality of your meditation. When you sit down to meditate, your mind plays back these conversations to you. This causes agitation and restlessness.

The more you try to curb these conversations during your meditation, the more they spring up. When you are unable to tackle restlessness caused by mental chatter, it leads to frustration ruining your meditation right away. Rather than a meditator you become a mediator – trying to negotiate between the assault of random thoughts and the desire to be quiet.

Silence of the mind leads to nine different forms of awareness. It is impossible to experience any stage of awareness without silence. Each stage leads you to a unique experience.

Before I dive into the various states, it's important to understand that a fleeting or one-off experience in meditation should not be confused with attaining a certain level of consciousness. For example, feeling a sensation in your spine or between your brows, or seeing flashes of light or glimpses into your future do not mean a meditator has reached an advanced level (unless you experience it every time you meditate). These experiences have little meaning. They can even be distractions, in fact. Consistency in anything comes from correct practice. And, practice is the basis of championing the art of meditation. Here are the nine states of awareness directly impacted by the quality of your silence and mindfulness.

1. Intellectual Awareness

This is called *vitarka prajñā*. Other than intellect, *vitarka* also means reasoning and opinion. *Prajñā* means wisdom, knowledge or intelligence. In this state of awareness, intelligence is limited to intellectual analysis at the external level. A mild meditator's wisdom is often devoid of experiential intelligence and is limited to intellectual understanding of all phenomena. At this level, everything you know is second hand, someone gave it to you. Meditators at this level are happy to accept the knowledge passed on to them through their scriptures or teachers.

2. Investigative Awareness

Yogic texts call it *vicāra prajñā*. It means the intelligence you gain from deliberating on a thought with discerning wisdom.

The meditator now develops a degree of mental alertness. Such an individual is no longer keen to accept the scriptures on its face value, he starts to internalize the teachings and reflect on them to arrive at their own truth. The first two states are limited to mild meditators. The next two, however, are experienced by the average or medium meditator.

3. Blissful Awareness

It is called *ananda pragya*. It's most interesting to note that an average meditator starts to experience an awareness of bliss long before realizing the final state

(which means bliss is not the ultimate state in its own right). Beginning to rise above the social and religious conditioning, this meditator starts to feel disconnected from scriptures and preaching. He or she gains the courage to question the scriptures and validate the truth on their own. A certain stability starts to emerge in their sessions of meditation and, while experiencing tranquility, they get glimpses into their real nature. When they persist, they invariably experience the following higher states of consciousness.

4. Self-Awareness

This is called *asmitā prajñā*. *Asmitā* generally means ego. The meditator in this state experiences his individual self (a sense of ego) merging into the cosmic self. You begin to experience that you are an exact replica of the macrocosm, and that you are just about as infinite and eternal as the universe. You start to realize, not just intellectually but empirically, that you are not just the body, mind or senses, but something beyond. That you are more than the sum total of flesh and bones, more than just your desires, that there's more than what meets the eye. Intense meditators progressively experience the next four states of consciousness.

5. Yoked Awareness

Yoga sutras and Upanishads call it *vashikara prajñā*. Its common meaning is subjugation of desire. This is the first irreversible state for an intense meditator. A practitioner at this level does not experience restlessness due to his or her desires even when they are not meditating. Their consciousness is now yoked to their object of meditation while carnal and other desires are curbed by superior awareness. Imagine what happens when someone falls in love. At the back of their mind, they are constantly thinking about the other person. Their consciousness is yoked to the thought of the one they love. This is a similar state of awareness with one important difference: a meditator cultivates it consciously and is in control of their awareness and not the other way around.

6. 'Cessative' Awareness

I am not sure if 'cessative' is a legit word, but I couldn't think of a better one to explain what I mean. This state is called *virāma pratyaya*. *Virāma* means cessation and *pratyaya* means understanding, intelligence or consciousness in the current context. When the seeker continues to walk the path of meditation,

the chattering nature of the mind starts to subside. You are able to remain focused on whatever you so wish without being bothered by internal noise or wandering thoughts. Better than subjugating your desire (however effortless) is to not have them at the first place. Hence, ‘cessative’ awareness is better than yoked. Remember that when we don’t abandon a thought it eventually either becomes a desire or an emotion.

7. Natural Awareness

This is called *bhava pratyaya* and it also means mental quietness. I’ve carefully chosen the word natural to depict this level of awareness. When you go beyond even concentration and focus, when you experience total cessation of all mental activity, something profound happens: you experience a complete stillness of the mind – no thoughts, no emotions, no analysis. This leads your mind to its natural state of pure, unimpeded eternal bliss. In this state, your desires and emotions don’t make you restless.

The primary difference between simple blissful awareness (third state) and this one is fluctuation of the consciousness. At the third state, even though you experience bliss, it’s easily disturbed by other thoughts and emotions. In the current state, however, you’ve already gone past subjugation of desire, you’ve already mastered cessation of mental activity. You remain undisturbed.

8. Skillful Awareness

This is called *upāya prajñā*. In Yajurveda and various Upanishads, *upāya* means approaching, accompanying, craft, or that by which one reaches one’s aim. But, I like B.K.S Iyengar’s definition of *upāya* the most, he calls it ‘skilful’. It is insightful to note that skilful awareness has been placed even after blissful and natural awareness. There is a pretty good reason for that. In the first seven states, while the meditator continues to progress, his or her contribution to the world at large is still quite limited.

They are still working towards their own bliss and peace. In the present state, however, it’s not just about them. Skilful awareness means they are able to retain their natural awareness of light and love, yet operate in the world forever helping others. The lives of many great masters, across many cultures, demonstrate exactly that. There are meditators who don’t stop here, they keep going.

They are called ‘supremely intense’. The next state is witnessed by such practitioners.

9. Supreme Awareness

The supremely intense meditator experiences the final state of awareness called *para vairagya*. It means supreme detachment. If not having desires is better than subjugation of desire then maintaining equanimity in fulfilment or non-fulfilment of desire is the ultimate state. Because, even though desires may well be the primary cause of most suffering, we can't deny that they have also been at the root of human progress. At a practical level, their value can't be underestimated. Somewhere someone desired a solution to a certain problem. And they came up with fire, tools, wheel, electricity, phone, airplane, computer and so on. An adept at this stage develops altruistic consciousness remaining unaffected by his or her desires. Firmly established in *samadhi* or *shamata* (calm abiding) they go on to dedicate their lives for the welfare of all sentient beings.

Is it necessary that you go through the rigours of meditation to experience supreme detachment? Not really. I chose meditation because its scientific basis appealed to me. There's another way as Patanajali put it:

> *Īśvarapranidhānātavā* [72]
>
> Fluctuations of the consciousness may be restrained by meditating on God and total surrender to him.

If you believe in God, you may still reach a state of supreme detachment by developing a personal relationship with your god and by surrendering to His will. This does raise an important question though: what about an atheist or an agnostic? Well, they have just as much chance, if not more, to live with supreme detachment. Ultimately, it's not about meditation or belief in some scripture or religion, it's about flowing with the river of life, it's about living it with compassion and gratitude. The more elevated you are, the more compassionate you are naturally. A spiritual being, regardless of their religious orientation, automatically develops a selfless concern for the welfare of everyone in our beautiful creation. Such temperament leads to the final state of emancipation – complete liberation.

Knowing what you now know about meditation, there's only one thing I would like to spell out further. If I can effectively communicate the only practice that matters in meditation, you will overcome all hurdles like a fine stallion jumping across a low barrier. Let me get to the crux of the meditation in as few words as possible.

Too lazy to be ambitious,
I let the world take care of itself.
Ten days' worth of rice in my bag;
a bundle of twigs by the fireplace.
Why chatter about delusion and enlightenment?
Listening to the night rain on my roof,
I sit comfortably, with both legs stretched out.[73]

Mental Exertion and Relaxation

Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman served as an advisor to the late Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. He once addressed the Knesset, the unicameral parliament of Israel. Soon after his speech was over, a Knesset member approached him and said, “In the Talmud, Hillel summarized Judaism in one sentence, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do so to your neighbour: this is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary.’ Could you summarize economics in one sentence?”

“Yes,” replied Friedman. “There is no such thing as a free lunch.” Similarly, if I were to sum up the art of meditation in one sentence, it would be, “Exert when relaxed and relax when exerted.”

Treat your mind with love, care and patience. It is through your mind alone that you reach a state of no-mind. To be mindful, alert, determined, disciplined, you need a sharp mind. You may tame a beast with fear but it will hurt you the first chance it gets. So, we have to tame it with love, compassion, firmness and discipline at the same time. You need to know when to pull up your mind and when to pacify it. This comes with practice and experience. This is the art of alternating between mental exertion and relaxation.

When it comes to the practice of meditation, this is the only thing you have to keep in mind. While meditating, when you feel restless or jittery, practice mental relaxation. Mental relaxation can be practiced by stopping your meditation and just breathing deeply. You could listen to the rhythm of your breath (not if you were actually meditating on breath to begin with, in which case simply stop and settle your gaze at a distant point).

Restlessness is caused by excessive thinking or mental exertion. Sometimes when you try too hard, you may be exerting more than necessary. It is absolutely critical to stop exerting at that time by not trying to renew your concentration. Instead, just stop and breathe.

When your concentration is crisp, your mindfulness fresh and your alertness alive, you experience the best meditation but after a while, it gets tiring for the

brain. It often means that rather than letting your mind settle in its natural state, you may have been exerting. You don't need to paddle a bike that's going downhill. You just need to know when to apply the brakes.

When your mind is tired from exerting or resting, it leads to loss of clarity. At that time, the mind not only starts drifting away, it actually is unable to detect laziness, sluggishness, loss of vigilance or any other defect. It essentially falls into a slumber and mindfulness is lost. The moment you become aware, practice mental exertion. Mental exertion is basically the act of renewing your vigour and focus. You can visualize a bright light, joyous tweeting of the birds on a warm winter day, gentle breeze, blue sky, anything to lift your mood.

Once your mind is alert again, resume your meditation but don't exert. Exert only when you feel a drop in your mindfulness or attentiveness, which means if you find yourself pursuing a thought and only realizing several seconds later that you were supposed to drop the thought instead of following it. It means a certain dullness has come about. If you are visualizing and find that your object of visualization has faded on your mental canvas and yet you sit unaware, it's loss of clarity. It means your mind is experiencing dullness, thus exert.

Mental exertion and relaxation is like driving a car on a highway. You don't step on the accelerator once your car has reached a desirable speed. You keep your foot there just in case or you may gently press if your speed drops, but mostly you just keep a certain pressure to maintain your speed. You are alert to press the brake as soon as you need to. If you don't, you can have an accident.

In meditation, you don't keep exerting once you've reached the right equilibrium. You keep yourself alert to press the brakes when you need to. When you slow down, you step on the gas again to gather momentum. As you gain experience in driving, you know when exactly to take your foot off. But, you have to be alert and mindful to be effective. In meditation too, with practice, you learn to be in the 'cruise mode' without undue exertion or relaxation. This is the science of meditation, the art of balancing between mental exertion and relaxation.

Remember, meditation is about discovering your natural state of peace and bliss. To be in the natural state, you have to be natural, it is effortless. This effortlessness, however, comes after a great deal of practice. A concert pianist who can play even the most difficult pieces effortlessly has reached that state after serious, intense and prolonged effort spanning over years. Concentration is not an intense effort. Once you have established your concentration during your meditation, you simply have to maintain it.

It takes great practice to artfully maintain a balance between exerting and relaxing. If you are mindful and alert and if you carefully alternate between exertion and relaxation, *Samadhi* – ultimate realization, equipoise or insight – is imminent. I promise you that much. Just like a river's natural course is to merge in the sea, mind's natural course is to merge in the supreme consciousness. I say this from my experience.

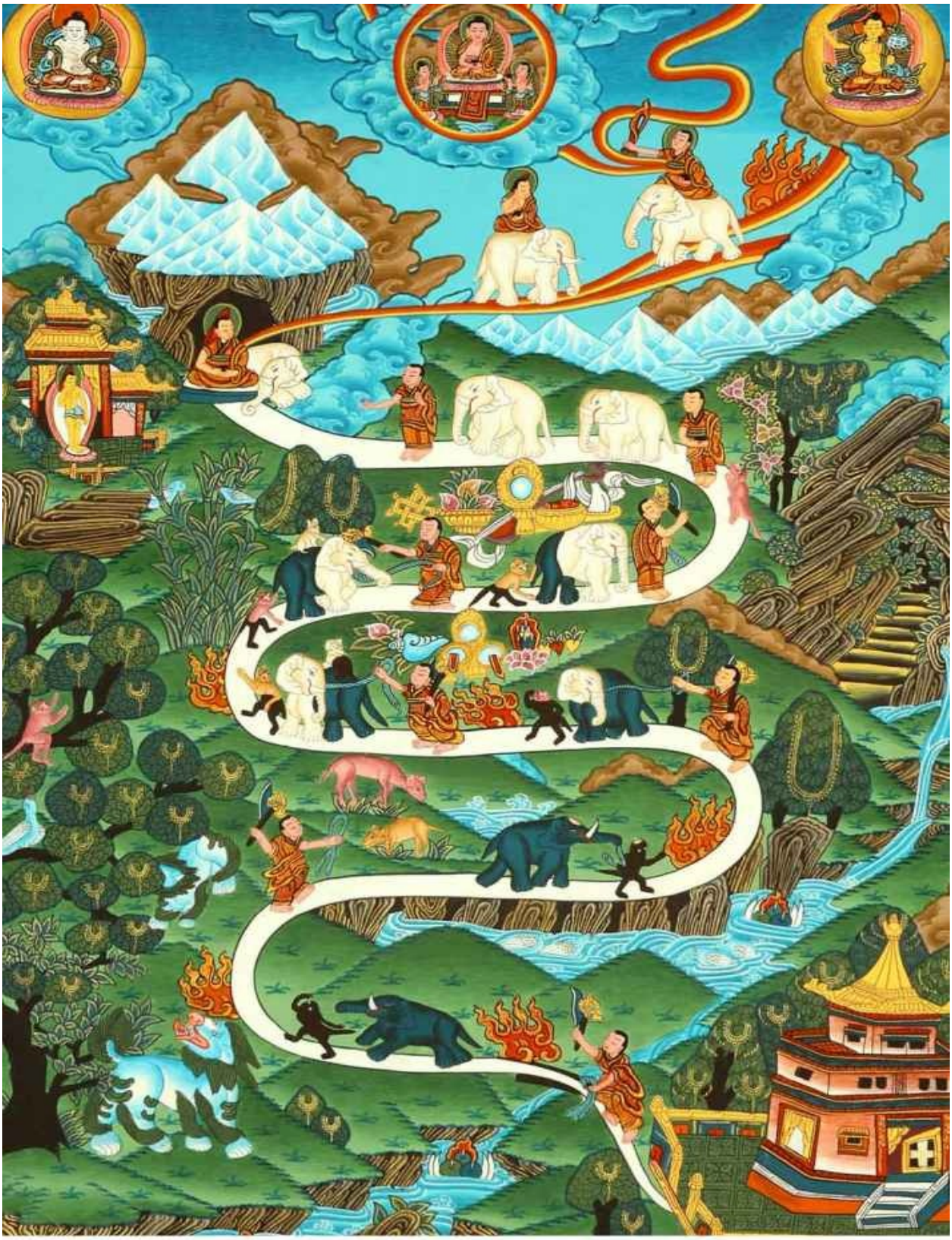
The Realization

- ✧ Nine Stages of Bliss
- ✧ Epilogue

The dedicated practitioner
experiences the spiritual way
as a turbulent mountain stream,
tumbling dangerously among boulders.

When maturity is reached,
the river flows smoothly and patiently
with the powerful sweep of the Ganges.

Emptying into the ocean of Mahamudra,
the water becomes ever-expanding light
that pours into great Clear Light
without direction, destination,
division, distinction or description.[74]



A Tibetan Thankga painting depicting the Nine Stages of Bliss

The Nine Stages of Bliss

In the striking picture on the opposite page you'll find three key elements: a monk, an elephant and a monkey. Additionally, the monk is holding a noose and a goad. The monk represents the meditator treading the windy path of meditation, where, until it's mastered, no two days are alike. Some days you experience good meditation and at other times, it's the opposite. The elephant represents dullness and the monkey restlessness.

The goad and noose represent vigilance and attentiveness in meditation, respectively.

In the first stage, the meditator is like a rocky boat in a turbulent ocean. There's virtually no control on the mind. Concentration at this stage ends up wherever the drift of thoughts take it. The monkey and the elephant constantly disrupt the meditation and the meditator is struggling to tame them.

In the second stage, there's a small white patch on the elephant and the monkey. It shows progress. It means the meditator is able to have short periods of quality meditation when the mind is devoid of thoughts. Think of a flag that flutters whenever the wind blows. If there's no wind, there's no fluttering. Similarly, the mind at this stage is stable for a short period before the winds of thoughts start to blow again causing waves in the stillness of consciousness.

The persistent meditator gets to the third stage and this is a significant progress in its own right. Now, they are able to detect their dullness arising in meditation. In the scroll, it is shown by a bigger white patch on the elephant and a noose leashing it. Restlessness or stray thoughts are still a great challenge at this stage.

In the fourth and the fifth stages, while the meditator makes a giant leap by even greater taming of restlessness and dullness, a new challenge presents itself. You'll see a rabbit riding the elephant now. This signifies a state of calmness which makes the meditator go into a sort of torpor or laxity. Often, most meditators who get even a tiny glimpse of this calmness, mistake this as the ultimate state of bliss.

In the sixth stage, the monk can be seen leading both the monkey and the

elephant, but the animals are not fully white yet. It means the meditator has mostly tamed them, he's able to lead them, but, there are still subtle elements of excitement or stupor that can distract the meditator.

The elephant is completely white and the monkey sits by the feet of the practitioner in the seventh stage. It shows that the meditator has nearly perfected the art of attention. He experiences lucid awareness during the meditation but the presence of monkey shows there's still a chance of feeling excited or restless. Think of a still pond where dropping even a tiny pebble causes ripples.

In the eighth stage, there's no monkey. Restlessness has completely disappeared for this meditator and a constant state of bliss always leaves him calm. But, sometimes in this state of bliss, the lucidity of awareness is adversely affected. Think of someone under the influence of a mild intoxicant. At this stage, the meditator hasn't yet learned to rise above the bliss.

In the ninth stage, the monk is sitting down with the white elephant. Bliss has become a close companion and it no longer interferes in any worldly activity. All mental and emotional battles cease, the war of thoughts stops and there's virtually no effort in meditation now. The meditator has become the meditation.

The stages beyond show the monk riding the elephant. These indicate other dimensions of existence. The meditator is ever calm, abiding in bliss. Any inner struggle or stress completely disappears. The meditator has gone beyond the meditation.

Here comes an important question I'm asked frequently, "Generally, what kind of an effort is required to reach the ninth stage?"

Roughly 1,500 hours of quality meditation is required to cross each stage. With right guidance and initiation, you may bring it down to around 1,000 hours. It's almost the effort a concert pianist puts in before they play under the spotlights in front of a large audience.

prasaṁkhyāne-'py-akusīdasya sarvathā
vivekakhyāteḥdharma-meghas-samādhiḥ.
tataḥ kleśa-karma-nivṛttiḥ.
tadā sarva-āvaraṇa-malāpetasya jñānasya-ānantyāt jñeyamalpam.
tataḥ kṛtārthānaṁ pariṇāma-krama-samāptir-guṇānām.
kṣaṇa-pratiyogī pariṇāma-aparānta nirgrāhyaḥ kramaḥ.[75]

The yogi who has no interest even in this highest state of evolution, and maintains supreme attentive, discriminative awareness, attains *dharmameghahsamadhi*: he contemplates the fragrance of virtue and justice.

Then comes the end of afflictions and of karma.

Then, when the veils of impurities are removed, the highest, subjective, pure, infinite knowledge is attained, and the knowable, the finite, appears as trivial.

When *dharmameghahsamadhi* is attained, qualities of nature (*gunas*) come to rest. Having fulfilled their purpose, their sequence of successive mutations is at an end.

As the mutations of the *gunas* cease to function, time, the uninterrupted movement of moments, stops. This deconstruction of the flow of time is comprehensible only at this final stage of emancipation.

Epilogue

It was towards the end of February 2011. At an altitude of 10,000 feet, in a Himalayan forest, with icicles hanging outside from the thatched roof, I sat in intense meditation. Ten hours of perfect stillness of the body and mind had passed as easily as the night turns to dawn.

The soft beams of the full moon landed on the Sri Yantra, a mandala, in front of me. This mandala was a geometrical representation of kundalini or Mother Divine and was an integral part of the meditation I was doing at the time. In that hut, there were enough fissures and holes letting light and air to enter how they pleased. It was a magnificent sight, to have the center of the mandala light up with a moonbeam.

I had drawn it on paper with a pencil and had used that simple piece of paper for seven months. The small rundown hut was plunged in darkness but for the moonlight that lit up the *yantra* most mystically, if not mysteriously. I'd started at 5 PM and it was 3 AM by now. It took me years to get here, a stage where I could sit in one posture for as long as I needed without affecting the lucidity of my meditation or the sharpness of my concentration.

I whispered my prayer thanking God, various energies and the forces of nature for allowing one more day of *sadhana*. Devoting my meditation to the welfare of every living being, I performed ten mudras, handlocks, to channelize the energy gained from the intense practice. The rats in the hut dashed around in all directions, as if they knew it was my time to get up and theirs to get off my asana, seat.

I used to sit, meditate and sleep in the same place. Three wooden planks laid next to each other formed my bed of 3x6 feet on the muddy floor. On those planks was a thin cotton mattress. On that mattress was one blanket. And on that blanket was a pillow. That's where I sat and meditated for seven months, averaging 20 hours a day. Most days I meditated between 18 and 22 hours. Following a strict regime of starting my roster of meditation at the same time, day-in day-out I carried on with my practice.

While I would meditate throughout the night, mice and rats would come and

sleep on the pillow next to me. For my stretch of ten hours, I would sit there unmoving even if they jumped in my lap. Not that I had any particular affinity towards them, I just wasn't prepared to disturb, much less abandon, my meditation for a bunch of rats. At first, it had felt awfully gross to have rats hop around me but over time, I'd developed a sort of friendship with them. They were my companions and the same God dwelled in them.

"You could do with some meditation", I murmured to the one who was hiding close by, darting glances back and forth and trying to anticipate my movement. One thing meditation immediately checks is the restive tendencies of the mind.

For the whole of seven months I was there, the rats would not spare anything. Not even my only shawl, or the spare batteries of my torch. I had a small bottle of clove oil, they took away the whole bottle in the first week. It was a small bottle though, about the size of my thumb, and the wild rats were bigger than their city cousins. The rats dug into everything – the wooden planks that made the walls of that hut, the mixture of cow dung and mud that had filled some of the gaping holes, the thatched roof, a couple of polybags that served as my makeshift tarp stuck in the roof to prevent it from leaking. They gnawed at anything they could sink their teeth into.

Yet, these aggressive rats never destroyed my bedding comprising my only quilt, mattress and two pillows (I used to sit on one pillow and keep one on the side). As if they knew that it would be extremely difficult for me to function without my bedding. Other than a quiet mind, it was the only comfort I had in that dilapidated cowshed held together by wooden planks, tarp, cow dung and hay. The rats never harmed me, not even once. But most of all, they never went even close to my mandala, the mystical Sri Yantra. Not even once they nibbled on the red cloth that covered it when not in use or the actual paper itself. As if they knew that this wasn't just a piece of paper but a field of energy, pure and at once divine.

At times, I felt they were just being playful, testing me, teasing me, joking with me. Nature does all that with the one who seeks to rise above it. Before she empowers you with bliss and insight, with siddhis and abilities, she makes sure that you are the right recipient. Too much is at stake. One wrong man, one Hitler, can cause irreparable and eternal damage to the entire mankind.

I lifted the little door – a makeshift door made by nailing together a few pieces of wood – and put it on the side. I bent in half and stepped outside. The soft radiance of the moon had barged into the darkness of the winter night. The light had jostled its way out of love lending a sense of completeness to the whole

of creation, as if to prove that light and darkness can coexist. This duality is the beauty of our existence. Joy and sorrow, heat and cold, good and bad, they coexist. A state of perfect inner serenity, free from the ripples of selfishness, that arises from meditation not only helps you live through the contradictions of life, but actually appreciate them.

It was snow all around, sparkling beautifully under the tranquil moonlight. The trees were quiet as if the boughs and leaves were sleeping too. Icy breeze blew gently. My ears and nose froze within the first minute. At a distance, I heard wild animals move suddenly, as if startled by my unexpected presence. A deer grunted loudly and another made a high-pitched 'baa' sound. In an instant, the large field was abuzz with a lot of activity. Wild boars made a mix of snorting, squealing and grating sounds and ran upwards to the hills. The bucks and does galloped towards the woods. Other animals, probably a bear, at a greater distance, also moved into the woods.

That night, they were more visible than most other nights, for tonight it wasn't just the full moon but clear sky as well – a rarity in the past three months with frequent storms, rains, snowfall and hail. The whole field ahead of me glittered like it was God's playground made from silver-dust.

It was pure bliss to see those wild animals move around.

I felt no fear (fearlessness is a natural by product of good meditation). I was in love, one with everything around. The Vedas call it *advaita*. Fear only arises in duality, in a sense of separation, that somehow you may lose the other one or that they may harm you. But who can harm you when there's only you around?

There's no fear in a divine union. This state of perfect union is the final stage of meditation. In this state, meditation ceases to be an act. Instead, it becomes a phenomenon, a state of mind.

These beautiful beings of the wild were merely an extension of my existence. It is here that you are not afraid of your own body. Like everything in the universe, all the wild animals around were nothing but my own reflection. They were my past lives. I had been a boar, a bear, a deer, a tiger. Everyone and everything around you was once a part of you or you were a part of them. The sum total of all we have ever been over the billions of years, across myriad life-forms, is eternally present in us, with us, around us. At all times. It's not just a matter of saying. If you continue to walk the path of meditation, one day you'll experience, know and understand the truth in my words.

I reached out to the roof and picked some snow. It was hardened than usual because it wasn't fresh snow. It was from the previous night. At any rate, it was

delicious. It would soothe the excessive heat generated in my body due to intense meditation.

The subtle vibrations had gradually turned into deep sensations coursing through my entire body and intensifying in my head like waterfalls and streams running through Himalayan hills and vales tumbling into the Ganges. The sensations in my head were beyond bear or expression. I hadn't yet learnt how to get rid of these acute sensations. A superb clarity of mind, senses, of the past, present and future coursed through the river of my consciousness. Sometimes I didn't want those sensations for they would render me completely useless to do anything else at all. Even the simple act of putting a *tilaka* on my forehead after I bathed would become a challenge.

All I could do was meditate and whenever I meditated they would continue to build up to a degree that I felt as if my body was not made from flesh and bones but it was simply a conduit of sensations, a container of energy. The container itself was made from nothing but energy. I pulsated as if there was no physical reality to my own existence. And yet, the body was governed by the laws of nature so I had gone through my fair share of pains and aches. Those aches, however, only intensified my resolve to persist with my meditation so I could go beyond the shackles of this body.

Merely knowing that this body is simply a vehicle, or that we hold within us an entire universe, is incomplete knowledge. It is wisdom without insight and doesn't lead to bliss but ignorance. I say ignorance because you end up forming these concepts without any experiential understanding. The rigours of meditation aren't for the fainthearted. Above everything else, in the beginning stages, it requires extraordinary patience and self- discipline.

I had moved deep into the Himalayan woods seeking even more intense solitude. A few villagers had come all the way to see me on the last day of my meditation in the woods. When I emerged from my hut seven months later, they were startled.

They thought a very weak and frail sadhu would come out from the hut for I'd lived on very little for more than seven months in extreme conditions. Sometimes, I would step out in the dead of the night and eat snow.

I had not seen my own face for months. Looking in a tiny mirror, I used to put the *tilaka* on my forehead once in 24 hours after bathing with icy-cold water. That mirror was too small to render a reflection of my entire face. I didn't know how I had looked. I knew I had lost weight but I didn't feel a lack of energy.

They were startled because there was not even the slightest sign of physical

weakness or any fatigue at all. For a moment, even I was surprised to look at my own face, the light in my own eyes, only momentarily though. For, I knew that my soul, free from all ties of relationships, religion and the world, was soaring high in the infinite universe of bliss. My source of energy was no longer the food I consumed but the thoughts I thought. And, I didn't think of anything. I'd been thoughtless for a long time now. Any thoughts I had were only of God or love.

What happens when you churn milk? It turns into butter and once done, it never goes back to being milk. If milk can stay for a few days before going sour, butter can stay fresh for a couple of weeks. If you heat up butter it becomes ghee, and ghee can remain unaffected for years. No matter how you treat it, it can never become butter or milk again.

The final state of bliss is akin to becoming ghee from milk – it's irreversible.

I had never wanted to come down from the Himalayas. That extraordinary bliss was beyond what I can ever explain. Hundreds of times I had heard the unstruck sound in my heart. Countless times, I had felt going out of my body to be wherever I wanted to be. On numerous occasions, I heard the most beautiful sounds, had the most magnificent visions. My world was complete. There was no need or the urge to come back. On the contrary, I wanted to drop my body.

But realization changes in you something irrevocably. You no longer just think about yourself. Even if you have no responsibilities or family, you can't just do whatever makes you happy. Somewhere, you recognize that you've been blessed in the most potent manner and that it is your duty to share your bliss with those who seek. No matter how much you may want to disregard, you feel obliged to live for the world around you. Like a cow finds joy in feeding its calf, you find your joy in serving the humanity. No matter how the world treats you, you never stop being compassionate. It happens naturally, that you end up putting others' interests before your own. In your selfless conduct you discover your greatest happiness.

Something miraculous happens to such a selfless person. The forces of universe sit by your feet waiting for your command. You can't be selfless unless you start to see everyone as part of you and you as part of everyone else. Until you gain an insight into that oneness, you treat yourself differently from others. But, once you gain an experiential understanding (not merely an intellectual) into the true nature of your mind and everything around you, an ever brimming compassion arises naturally for all sentient beings.

Any attainment is worthless if it doesn't help our world move forward. Any meditation is pointless if it doesn't expand your consciousness, if it doesn't

amplify your existence and bring in you compassion, positivity and love. That’s what meditation is about. This has been my journey. Go, embark on yours.

Notes

1. Srila Prabhupada, trans., *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* (Tokyo: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1972), 6.46.
2. I've given a contextual translation of the quartet: *umā kahaūm̐ maiṃ anubhava apanā, sata hari bhajana jagata saba sapanā.* Goswami Tulasidasa, *Ramcharitmanas*, (Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 1999), Aranya Kanda, 38.3.
3. Srila Prabhupada, trans., *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* (Tokyo: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1972), 6.20–23.5.
4. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, 6.33–634. My own translation.
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7. Ken Mcleod, trans., *Pith Instructions on Mahamudra*. Online: naturalawareness.net/ganges.html. Last accessed: Aug 21, 2016.
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9. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, 16.22. My own translation.
10. Max F. Muller, trans., *The Dhammapada: A Collection of Verses Being One of the Canonical Books of the Buddhists* (Low Price Publications, 2006), 1–2.
11. Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras*, 2.12. My own translation.
12. *ibid*, 1.11. My own translation.
13. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, 6.17. My own translation.
14. *ibid*, 6.19. My own translation.
15. Paraphrased from Ajahn Brahm, *Don't Worry, Be Grumpy* (Massachusetts, Wisdom Publications, 2014) 1.
16. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, 6.20–21. My own translation.
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18. *ibid*, 6.26. My own translation.
19. *ibid*, 6.13. My own translation.
20. *ibid*, 6.12. My own translation.

21. *ibid*, 18.73–74. My own translation.
22. Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, *Mahamudra: The Moonlight – Quintessence of Mind and Meditation* (Massachusetts, Wisdom Publications, 2006), 1.25f.
23. Thanissaro Bhikku, trans., *Right Mindfulness – Access to Insight*. Online: accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/rightmindfulness.pdf. 47.35, 36.7 Last accessed: 21 Aug, 2016.
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25. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, 6.20. My own translation.
26. Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, *Mahamudra: The Moonlight – Quintessence of Mind and Meditation* (Massachusetts, Wisdom Publications, 2006), 3.149b.
27. Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra. 100, 104. My own translation.
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48. B. K. S. Iyengar, trans., *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali,* (London, Thorsons, 2002), 2.3–4, 9.
49. ibid, 1.18.
50. ibid, 1.20.
51. ibid, 2.11.
52. ibid, 2.10.
53. Shiva Samhita, 5.9.
54. ibid, 5.3.
55. Ibid, 5.4.
56. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, 2.52. My own translation.
57. *Shiva Samhita*, 5.5.
58. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, 6.11–12. My own translation.
59. *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra*. 60.
60. *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*,1.58.5–59.
61. Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras*, 1.21. My own translation.
62. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita, 17.16*. My own translation.
63. ibid, 6.10.
64. ibid, 2.55.
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